

10-137

PIONEER LIBRA
BINDERY
LINCOLN & ALL
518 W. BURNSIDE

RECORD

Mrs. J. H. Probasco
Seal Rock, Oregon
Sept. 1908

MATILDA

GOVERNESS OF THE ENGLISH



THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
NEW YORK • BOSTON • CHICAGO • DALLAS
ATLANTA • SAN FRANCISCO

MACMILLAN & CO., LIMITED
LONDON • BOMBAY • CALCUTTA
MELBOURNE

THE MACMILLAN CO. OF CANADA, LTD.
TORONTO

MATILDA

GOVERNESS OF THE ENGLISH

BY

SOPHIA CLEUGH

New York

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

1924

All rights reserved

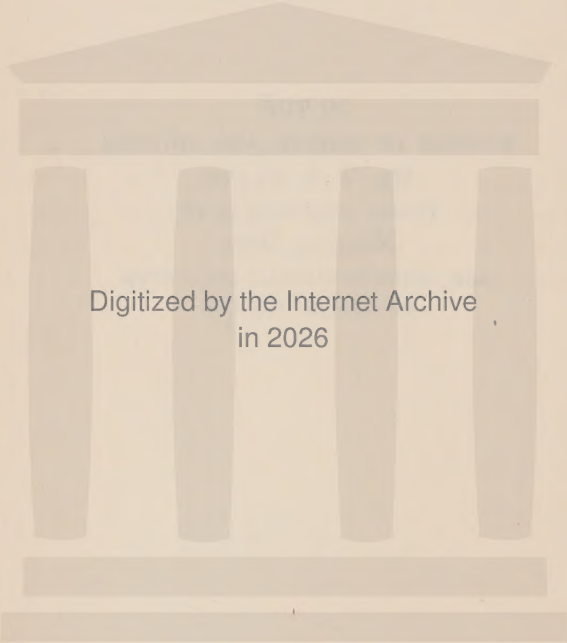
COPYRIGHT, 1924,
By THE MACMILLAN COMPANY.

Set up and electrotyped.
Published October, 1924.

7389

Printed in the United States of America by
J. J. LITTLE AND IVES COMPANY, NEW YORK

TO THE
KINDEST OF FRIENDS AND ADVISERS
MR. T. S. CURTIS
THESE CHRONICLES OF
MATILDA HOPE
ARE AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED
BY THEIR AUTHOR



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2026

“We must have a weak spot or two in a character before we can love it much. People that do not laugh or cry or take more of anything than is good for them, or use anything but dictionary words, are admirable subjects for biographies. But we don’t always care most for those flat pattern flowers that press best in the herbarium.”

THE PROFESSOR AT THE BREAKFAST TABLE.

Oliver Wendell Holmes.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. INTRODUCES A YOUNG LADY	1
II. TREATS OF A DISCUSSION OVER A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION BETWEEN TWO LADIES	34
III. SHOWS SOMETHING OF THE DUCHESS'S MIND: AND INTRODUCES THE LADIES CAROLINE AND CHARLOTTE .	50
IV. TELLS OF THE FATE OF A HACKNEY CARRIAGE AND WHAT CAME OF IT	82
V. SKETCHES THE ARRIVAL OF MATILDA AT TILNEY HOUSE: AND DESCRIBES HER FIRST MEETING WITH LORD GEORGE AND HIS TWIN SISTERS	119
VI. SETS FORTH A DAY IN THE LIFE OF MATILDA AT TIL- NEY HOUSE	145
VII. RELATES HOW MATILDA CAME ACROSS A CERTAIN YOUNG GENTLEMAN AGAIN	158
VIII. EXPLAINS AMONGST OTHER THINGS WHY LORD GEORGE REFUSED TO SAY HIS PRAYERS: AND WHAT KIND OF A LETTER MATILDA RECEIVED	185
IX. IN WHICH THE LADIES CAROLINE AND CHARLOTTE DIS- COURSE MAINLY UPON THE HEROES OF HISTORY AND UPON LITERATURE	215
X. IN WHICH, AMONGST OTHER THINGS, THE FRENCH EMPEROR AND HIS CONSORT ARRIVE IN TOWN: AND MATILDA RECEIVES AN UNEXPECTED BLOW	233
XI. CONTAINS AN ACCOUNT OF MATILDA'S THIRD MEETING WITH LADY SARAH: AND OF HOW HORTENSE MADE HER READY FOR HER FIRST EVENING FUNCTION AND IN SO DOING ASTONISHED MR. FRANCIS	248
XII. IN WHICH MATILDA VISITS THE PLAY: AND SEES AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE AND MAKES A NEW ONE	266
XIII. SETS DOWN WHAT HAPPENED TO MATILDA ON HER SECOND VISIT TO MONSIEUR LE CHEMINANT	277

CHAPTER	PAGE
XIV. DESCRIBES HOW MATILDA MET A RECENT ACQUAINTANCE IN ST. JAMES'S PARK AND HOW SHE ENCOUNTERED A MUCH DISCUSSED ADMIRER OF LADY VICTORIA'S ON ONE AND THE SAME MORNING . . .	295
XV. TELLS OF THE STRANGE HAPPENINGS AT THE TILNEY HOUSE MASKED BALL: AND OF MATILDA'S FIRST KISS	316
XVI. RELATES HOW LADY SARAH MADE COMPLETE HAY OF ALL THE DUCHESS'S PLANS; AND HOW, EGGED ON BY HER, LADY VICTORIA PREVAILED ON MATILDA TO CARRY OUT CERTAIN ALTERATIONS IN THEM . . .	339
XVII. IS A PERFECTLY FAITHFUL RECORD OF WHAT HAPPENED TO MATILDA ON LADY VICTORIA'S WEDDING DAY . . .	367
XVIII. RECOUNTS HOW THE DUCHESS RECEIVED AN UNLOOKED FOR VISITOR: AND HOW MR. FRANCIS FOUND HIMSELF THE CENTRE OF A STORM	390
XIX. NARRATES HOW MATILDA LISTENED TO A MOVING TALE: AND HOW THEREAFTER SHE MADE A CHOICE BETWEEN TWO WAYS OF LIVING	406
XX. CONTAINS SOMETHING OF EVERYTHING: AND SHOWS MATILDA IN AN ENTIRELY NEW SET OF CIRCUMSTANCES	426
XXI. IN WHICH MATILDA DRIVES ALONG THE ROAD OF DESTINY	440
XXII. IN WHICH THE TOSSING OF A COIN IS PRODUCTIVE OF THE HAPPIEST OF RESULTS	453

•

MATILDA

GOVERNESS OF THE ENGLISH

MATILDA— GOVERNESS OF THE ENGLISH

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCES A YOUNG LADY

FROM the earliest periods of civilization man has played his life's game with that inscrutable, if capricious, goddess, Dame Fortune.

Not a few players in their overmastering desire to have as many knocks at her shining ball as may be, have not, in their flurry, devoted sufficient consideration to the direction in which they should send that elusive missile to advantage themselves to the fullest extent. With sooner or later much to be regretted results. For Dame Fortune is a very old hand at the game, and cunning as a cartload of monkeys in knowledge of the rules. More players receiving but the bare chance of one meagre hit, in the oft-times turbulent scrimmage, allow the ball to slip by them from sheer nervousness; whilst the great majority of mankind rapidly become mere spectators, and never get closer than a distant faint viewing of the struggle. Perhaps these are the happiest in the end, for to them the tossed ball brings merely a vicarious excitement. Its ultimate goal does not affect them personally at all; their rôle, like it or not as they may, being restricted to the applauding or criticizing of the efforts of others. And so on——

Thus far had Matilda listened, docilely enough one must admit, to a, in her opinion, singularly dry, though possibly

learned, disquisition on this momentous subject of Fortune and her shining globe; of which the foregoing was but the text, or preamble, so it appeared, to far deeper philosophical arguments. Moreover Matilda had listened with an exemplary patience. But at last the calm was becoming a little studied, the silence entirely deceptive as to the amount of real attention it implied; for now, after at least twenty minutes' monologue, by the clock, on the part of her legal mentor and adviser, it must be confessed that Matilda was frankly bored and wearied, almost to the verge of tears.

But in the year of Our Lord eighteen hundred and fifty-five properly brought up young ladies were not permitted to give way to their feelings. So, decorously stifling a yawn of extreme lassitude, Matilda leant a little farther back into the great leather-winged chair in which she sat, folded her slender hands yet more demurely in her cashmere lap, and composed herself to remain in an attitude of polite attention till it should please Heaven either to rescue her from her present situation, or put an end to the sermon.

For it had just begun to dawn on her that, after all, this eloquent oration was only yet another homily; and, as usual, aimed at her improvement. On realizing this, Matilda could not help sighing. For just how sick she was of lectures and all that they implied only she and her poor, over-worked conscience knew.

On general principles she loathed this curious habit grown-up people had of bursting into eloquence on all occasions; no matter what the subject.

It was all one to her whether the material was drawn from texts so diverse as the Biblical wanderings of that disconsolate lady who once ruled over Sheba, or the much more recent and curious mental divagations of those gentlemen who had the honour to be Her Majesty's ministers, for the time being. Somehow or other the matter under discussion invariably assumed a personal note about half-way. And from then on, her own shortcomings ran a parallel course with those of the original delinquents. For

Matilda, indeed, one might almost lay it down as an axiom that all roads led to Rome.

She would probably not have felt so bitterly about this endless admonition if she had been allowed to speak in her own defence: Say once a week, at least. But whilst the luckless girl had ever been obliged to bow before these storms of words, she had never been permitted during the last dozen dull and correct years of her scholastic career to rebut any accusation brought against her; however fantastic or far-fetched. Even when she found herself on one never-to-be-forgotten occasion likened to a French clown! A being with a whitened face and baggy continuations, who jumped through hoops and fell over everything he possibly could! The very idea caused Matilda to blush for shame at first; although a moment's calmer reflection convinced her that after all someone had to play the clown's part, and he might be quite a different being at home.

Still—a clown!

Now if she had been compared to a bareback rider, she wouldn't have minded so much. For at least that figure was romantic and compelling; and secretly she admired immensely that lovely apparition in diaphanous and swaying skirts, lightly poised above several noble and coal-black steeds, on whom all eyes were bent; and to whom the very ring master bowed in homage nightly.

But—a clown!

In after years she dated from this painful moment her impatience with those people who wished to improve her. In her humble opinion improving her simply meant closing up all avenues to freedom and gaiety of spirit.

And above all things Matilda, being young, loved sunshine and laughter. Inwardly shuddering, she considered that life, as she had up till then lived it, was dull as ditch water. Hedged round with rules which made good conduct a thing of cramping misery.

Matilda mentally shrugged her shoulders.

So few people had the art of living, she reflected.

Probably it had to be born with one: it could not be acquired. She was about to ask Mr. Francis his views on the art of living; but, lending once more a temporary attention to his smoothly flowing periods, found that he was still hard at it; and that this harangue, like every other, was obviously intended to interfere with and curtail the pleasures of existence. That is if she followed the advice it contained.

"I should be in my grave if I listened to them all," she thought. And she moved restlessly in her chair for it really seemed too hard that today, of all days, the elderly lawyer, who had known her from a baby, and who in her eyes never seemed to grow any older, so waxen of hue and grey-haired had he always been, even he must needs waste precious time on this silly subject of Fortune—the very idea being a ridiculous one to Matilda. For had not her bad luck been proverbial at school? She had always been found out if she had dared to break the teeniest rule. And the voice of authority had subsequently spoken with lungs of leather and a throat of brass, as the saying goes.

So what had she to do with Fortune? Mr. Francis might really have chosen a better theme.

Therefore, more than a little resentful at his want of tact, she leant back and ceased to listen to the excellent man of law. Good soul, he never guessed what palpitations, trepidations, and excitement lay concealed behind Matilda's demure exterior. It is true that his shrewd and calculating glance measured her more than once, but it gained no inkling of the agitated fluster she was in—a perturbation that, at moments, in spite of all her stern determination to remain silent and compliant, threatened to bubble over into speech of the most impulsive and unguarded character.

For to her this windy and grey March Tuesday was a day of days. One that for weeks past had been marked with a thick red ink circle in her calendar. A day, too whose gradual approach had made her even more than usual the target of much veiled sarcasm and eloquent

prophecies on the part of certain elderly ladies with whom her lot had been cast for many a weary year. To Matilda it had been painfully obvious that the Misses Nixon did not view with approval the unexpected release of their hard-worked little pupil teacher from her multifarious duties, in their Select Seminary for Young Ladies. However, as the decision did not rest with them, but with Mr. Francis, that Matilda, having now reached those years of discretion, so underlined in her Church Catechism, was to embark on a new mode of life, the wailings of her scholastic superiors troubled her very little.

And now she had come to the great day at last—discreet or not—and Mr. Francis having himself furnished her with her railway ticket, and an escort from the station, she was really started on the new road.

That she was very young and friendless did not alarm her at all. For Matilda was of a courageous turn of mind, and she was far from realizing that she could be an object of concern to anyone. Truth to tell, she was much more used to being called “a limb”; and roundly scolded for “a miserable sinner.” How much she had detested her life at the Misses Nixons’ Select Seminary only she knew. And looking at it, quite dispassionately, her judgment was that she had always been a round peg in a square hole; but had seen no way of altering things until, quite suddenly, in a blessed hour, Mr. Francis’ letter of instructions had arrived. And forthwith the door of the prison turned on its hinges. And now, come what might, the new existence was at least untried and fresh. And might even hold wonderful possibilities for her.

Silently, Matilda determined that it should. And these reflections caused her to smile. For she loved new clothes, new scenes, and new faces.

And if it all sounds a little self-centred it must be remembered, in extenuation, that Matilda was only just seventeen. In fact this very Tuesday was her birthday.

And knowing it Mr. Francis might have guessed at the

state of her mind. But so intent was he on suggesting for her consideration a course of tiresomely prudent behaviour a depressingly dull and circumspect treading of the new path, that carried away by his own eloquence he completely overlooked the plain, unadorned truth which was, that Matilda, naughty little puss, had by this time ceased to pay him the slightest attention.

It is true that her bright eyes were bent thoughtfully on the flickering flames of the coal fire in the round Queer Anne grate, and that her whole attitude suggested profound consideration of the lawyer's well-turned periods. But—appearances, from time immemorial, have too often, as we know, been extremely deceptive; and, frankly, Matilda was by this time busily occupied in reliving the scenes of the morning—from the moment when, in a cold and gloomy dawn, she rose from her hard little bed in her sparsely furnished garret: and, by the light of a solitary dip candle dressed herself, and ran downstairs, all excitement, to a hasty breakfast in the freezing and empty dining-room: to the final moment of departure from the only home she had ever known, when her great friend, Eliza Porter, the cook had thrown an old shoe after her for luck (as previously arranged between them), to the four Misses Nixons' shrilly expressed disapproval. But Eliza, being far too important a person in the household to care for anyone's opinion good or bad, had merely laughed in her hearty way; and her farewells in consequence had been both defiant and encouraging to the departing Matilda. And had caused Miss Sara Ann Nixon to retire hastily into the hall of the Swallow's Nest some moments before she had intended to.

And so Matilda had started on her journey—in disgrace as usual. Jogging along the Dover Road, behind the lazy old pony, she had sat back in the chaise and laughed for sheer gladness at being quit of all she had most disliked until Silas, the old gardener, had, looking down at her from his high-driving seat, chuckled drily and remarked, "You're glad to be going."

Matilda's nod was emphatic.

"And I don't blame you, missie," had continued the old man, flicking his whip at the monumentally ancient pony without the slightest visible effect on that intelligent animal, "I don't blame you. But just you remember this 'ere world is a wail of misery for them as has no money. And you're young and—don't you go a 'burning of no boats."

A little confused at his lurid nautical allusion, Matilda wrinkled her brows.

"I'm sure I don't want to set anything on fire. But do you mean I ought to be sorry to be leaving, and pretend to be fond of the Misses Nixon?"

Old Silas shook his head.

"I won't go so far as to say that, missie. I've seen ye grow up, and they've been too severe with a young thing like you many a time, I'll admit. But, after all, there's some of us been very fond of ye. That Eliza—and that comical old Froggie Mounseir—and Miss Agnes herself, at times, with all her prim notions—And a roof's a roof."

Matilda nodded.

"I know," she said, "you're quite right, Silas. And I shan't forget you, and cook, and dear old Monsieur—you've all been very kind to me."

"And you'll write to them?" he jerked his whip backwards in the direction of the rapidly disappearing chimneys of the Swallow's Nest.

"But I shall be a hypocrite," sighed Matilda.

Silas looked down at her small face, almost hidden in its beaver bonnet, and smiled.

"There's times when we all have to do our dooty, and swaller our feelings," he pointed out.

And so, thus wisely counselled, Matilda had decided to destroy no bridges and to write a suitable letter of thanks and appreciation to her whilom teachers on reaching her destination. And suddenly in the midst of the pain of polite epistolary composition she was recalled to the present and

was startled to find that Mr. Francis was in the last stages of his discourse and speaking of things that really mattered.

"Finally," he was saying in his measured way, "I have to acquaint you, my child, with the fact that besides finding you, on the instructions of my client, and your godparent and guardian, a good honest situation as nursery governess in a well-connected family of position——"

"Yes," murmured Matilda, as he paused to take breath and snuff at the same moment.

"In short, governess to the younger children of the Duchess of Westmainham at Tilney House, Mayfair——"

Again he paused.

"Yes, oh, yes," breathed Matilda, anxious for him to come to the point.

"A situation which you now understand you are to enter at once——"

"In a hackney coach," softly observed Matilda, not raising her eyes from a rapt contemplation of the fender and its highly polished fire-irons.

Mr. Francis stared at her.

"In a hackney coach, certainly."

Across his level tones crept a hint of surprised puzzle. A strange, rather foolish remark, it appeared to him. Why insist so unnecessarily on the manner of her conveyance to Tilney House? When it was obvious to the poorest intelligence that the child could not walk from Bedford Row to Mayfair on this wretched day of drizzle and gusty winds; even had she been unencumbered by her battered school trunk and that terrible carpet-bag of which she seemed so solicitous; and which looked so very precariously fastened together with old bits of knotted cord. (Silas' careful work.)

Mr. Francis scrutinized the downcast face with curiosity, endeavouring to ascertain whether her remark had been merely the careless affirmation it seemed of his arrangements for her, or whether the sentence might hold some

hidden and more subtle meaning which he was at a loss to understand. Matilda, however, continuing to gaze placidly into the fire with an expression, or, more accurately, want of one that was almost wooden, he came to the conclusion that she had meant nothing in particular by the absurd remark, and that here she was, as usual, only following out some train of childish reflection which was entirely frivolous and of no consequence. This was probably one of those traits in her character that Miss Sara Ann Nixon had so disapproved of; and so often mentioned to him in terms of eloquent distress. This habit of mind that occupied itself with trifles; or, as Miss Nixon aptly phrased it, "this catching at straws of which Matilda was so fond," and which wasted valuable time. Therefore, after a displeased pause at such unlooked-for trifling, Mr. Francis cleared his throat impressively and continued:

"I have at the same time been instructed to hand you the sum of fifteen pounds and ten shillings for an outfit, shall we call it, on entering your new situation——"

Matilda raised her head.

"I have a receipt which if you will sign——"

"Why the ten shillings?" she suddenly interrupted.

But before he could reply, taken aback as he was at the question, she began to laugh in open and undisguised amusement. And that laugh, impossible as it may appear, altered the now thoroughly startled and astonished lawyer's whole conception of Matilda's character—in a flash. For a moment he could only gape at her like a fool, open-mouthed. So warm and joyous was the clear, bell-like sound that, coming as it did so unexpectedly at the tail-end of an hour's silence and submission, in the middle of what to Matilda should have been a really momentous interview, the effect on Mr. Francis was electrifying. It is no exaggeration to say that it completely nonplussed him for the moment: and that he hardly knew whether to believe his ears or not.

His preconceived opinions falling about him in ruins, the lawyer stared at her, stroking his chin thoughtfully; a habit of his when perplexed or annoyed.

Here, on a sudden, was a new and entirely unknown being sitting before him. A being whose very existence he had had no inkling of, even five minutes before. One of compelling charm, or he was very much mistaken. With possibilities indeed—dangerous ones, even. No mere insignificant, hard-working little drudge sat there, as the Misses Nixon had led him to believe.

Mr. Francis frowned and wished rather weakly that Matilda had not laughed. For then he had had no need to revise his estimate of her character; nor would he have found himself, for no good reason that he could see, a second after, wishing she would laugh again. Contradictory Mr. Francis.

The whole episode was most disturbing, most disturbing.

For up to that instant in all the years he had known her, from a round-eyed, silent child in a too-short tartan frock, to the present day, he had considered the slim young person in the heavy, ill-fitting jacket and the ugly beaver bonnet now before him as rather a dull, stupid little thing. A being to be rather sorry for than otherwise. And one not as intelligent or businesslike as he personally could have wished, seeing that she would have to earn her own living from her seventeenth birthday. And that in sober earnest he did not know of one living soul, outside of himself, in all the world, to whom she had a right to turn for help or guidance in any crisis that might arise. Further, from his very position, his hands must necessarily, to a great extent, be tied. Again, he had always considered her a plain child, which was, perhaps, just as well for the solitary young thing to be. Beauty in the world alone often had but a stony path to tread. She had a pair of fine eyes, perhaps, and an oval, delicate contour of face, that was not displeasing, and betokened race certainly. But now another doubt assailed him. Was she so plain and insignificant? Decidedly

her nose was not entirely classic in outline—it partook more of the tip-tilted variety. And her mouth was possibly too large for real beauty; although it was good-humoured, and well enough in shape. But clothes—the right kind—might effect a transformation. Mr. Francis in his wide experience of man and woman knew the value of clothes *per se*, very well. And as for that laugh of hers, gaiety incarnate, that expressive shrug of the shoulders that went with it, that almost husky deepening of the voice,—in short, the whole amazing effect; here was that which altered everything, effected a transformation indeed. In Mr. Francis' reluctant opinion the child was compellingly—damnably—attractive. Cinderella changed into a great lady, amused and aloof, before his very eyes. And vanished forever, as far as he was concerned, was the merely raw schoolgirl; fit only for governing unruly brats.

Mr. Francis took more snuff whilst he pondered the new situation. Who sat there before him?

A nonentity—as he had believed and hoped: or—the child of her parents? In short—Matilda.

“Why the ten shillings?” she repeated pensively; but more as one that follows out a train of thought than expects an answer to a question.

“Such a queer sum to choose, Mr. Francis.” And for the second time she laughed wholeheartedly.

“I believe,” she added with apparent inconsequence, “I should like to meet my mysterious god-parent.”

Mr. Francis started.

“I wonder if he has a funny mind like mine. Miss Sara Ann always affirmed that I had a most singular mind.”

Uneasily the lawyer broke in.

“Impossible, quite impossible. You know the conditions under which you have been brought up, Matilda, as well as I do.”

She nodded with open indifference. “He was never to be bothered with me either writing or wanting to see him at any time; in consideration of which, I being an orphan,

he was prepared to maintain and educate me till I was of an age to support myself."

She recited the conditions as a child repeats a well-learned lesson: and with the same careless unconcern for its meaning.

"Exactly," Mr. Francis rejoined. "Besides his residence is not in this country." He added the information half absently.

"Well, well," conceded Matilda, "I don't really want to meet him, you know. It was just an idea. He hasn't been very wishful to see me all these years, has he?" Her speculative tone took a brisker note. "I daresay he's a horrid old man—as ugly as sin."

"Good Heavens!" he cried, for once completely thrown off his balance. "He used to be one of the handsomest men of his day."

The sentence uttered he could have bitten out his tongue for having said it. But Matilda did not appear to have paid much attention to the assertion. She shrugged her shoulders in that half-foreign, characteristic way of hers and dismissed her nebulous god-parent and his good looks from her mind, and the conversation, at the same instant.

"Best let sleeping dogs lie," she remarked cheerfully.

"Dear, dear," cried Mr. Francis. "This is all very disturbing. I really don't know——"

Hesitating as to what he should say next, he finally took refuge in his snuff box again, and a large bandana handkerchief, behind which he disappeared almost entirely to blow his unoffending nose so loudly that the sound even penetrated to the floor below; causing the clerks at work there to look up from their ledgers and deeds what time they exchanged confidential winks and nods and remarked to each other that old "Pepper and Salt" had met with a reverse upstairs seemingly and at the hands of his mysterious client, for undoubtedly he was using signals of distress. And who would have dreamt that a plain slip of a little governess could have drawn blood in the first round,

eh, you fellows? Trust a dowdy minx like the one upstairs to ask indiscreet questions. In which estimate of her character they wronged Matilda. For curiosity was not one of her failings, as it happened.

But the fact remained that Mr. Francis was for the moment all at sea; and Matilda had not the slightest inkling of what she had done. And meanwhile she was animatedly making plans.

"I know what I shall do with that ten shillings," she cried. "And I can sign the receipt as soon as ever you like."

She jumped quickly to her feet as she spoke, pulling off her right hand glove at the same time; which was a shapeless thing of black cotton. At the tip of the first finger there was a hole of considerable dimensions.

"I shall," she announced running up to the table at which Mr. Francis sat, "buy a parasol with it for the summer. One with fringe, I think—either green or purple in colour. I have always longed for one but Miss Janet Nixon—the one in the sandy wig, you know—never would permit me to have one. She considered it extremely unbecoming in a pupil teacher. Why, I never could understand—the sun shone on me quite as much as on the parlour boarders. It is detestable to be a poor pupil teacher," she continued wrinkling up her eyebrows reflectively, "one gets pushed about so much. I used to wish sometimes I had been born a cook."

"A cook?" repeated Mr. Francis.

"Yes, for she is invariably treated with respect; and at least her kitchen is always warm and no one dares lecture her too much—in case she burns the food."

Mr. Francis chuckled.

"For that makes the parlour boarders complain to their parents."

Matilda paused to sigh heavily. "But you have to be fat and old to be a cook," she ended.

This curious ambition as set forth in all gravity by Matilda, left Mr. Francis secretly amused.

"I daresay—I daresay," he replied. "But your destiny, let us hope, leads you to higher walks of life than that of a mere culinary expert."

"Silas always impressed on me it was a splendid thing to be able to do one job well; and I rather like cooking."

Mr. Francis looked up.

"Silas? Who was Silas?" he asked.

"The gardener," returned Matilda, "and you can't think how clever he was at catching snails."

"Ah!" said Mr. Francis, drumming thoughtfully on the table. "Silas would appear to have acquired wisdom in the course of his snail-catching career. Still, although we never know what we may become during our life, I should very much deprecate the notion of your turning cook, my child." And he smiled openly at her.

"Oh, well—," conceded Matilda, and, meeting his amused glance tranquilly enough, docilely abandoned the career under discussion from that moment. She was in those days a very biddable little person.

"Anyway, I'm not fat enough," she admitted. "But I can cook, you know, so if I were ever cast on a desert island I should be quite useful—frying yams and things like that," she ended vaguely.

"Hum," said Mr. Francis.

But he did not comment further on the subject; instead he began to untie a bundle of papers on the desk before him.

"Now where do I sign this receipt?" she demanded, making a birdlike dart at the rack of pens on the table, and taking up a huge quill at random, which she flourished in a frowning effort to appear extremely businesslike. Mr. Francis handed her a form of receipt: indicating at the same time the precise spot on which she should inscribe her name. Matilda took the receipt, cleared a space at his elbow, and knelt down. Then she dipped her pen in the ink.

"Fifteen pounds—ten shillings—" she read with another

gurgle of laughter. "Why that ten shillings? Such a funny old codger."

"Matilda!" remonstrated Mr. Francis.

"Well, he must be."

And then she wrote her name on the precise spot indicated by the man of law with meticulous care, in a flowing Italian hand.

Mr. Francis watched her busy pen in silence.

"Matilda Hope Horsey."

Then she looked up at him.

"Shall I put in my age?" she asked.

"Good gad, no!" cried Mr. Francis. "Not at all necessary."

"Oh, well—just as you like. But it seems a pity as I am seventeen today. And I could get it in quite easily—in that corner."

She indicated the exact spot with a careful finger as she ended the final letter of her signature with a schoolgirl flourish that her late preceptress, Miss Janet Nixon, would have much disliked. Then she jumped to her feet, falling back a step or two to regard her handiwork with unconcealed admiration.

"It's the first time my name has ever been worth a penny," she observed.

Mr. Francis gathered up the receipt and blotted it.

"I hope you will be worth larger sums of money than this in the future," he rejoined handing her in exchange for the slip of paper fifteen golden sovereigns and one ten shilling piece. This, to his great consternation, Matilda immediately conveyed to her rosy mouth and bit.

"My dear child!" cried Mr. Francis.

"Old Silas always did it," gravely explained Matilda.

"You are not old Silas."

"I wanted to see if it was quite good, it looked so funny and small," Matilda explained.

And then before she could be prevented, to Mr. Francis' horror, she began, with a deplorable carelessness, to stuff

the money away into a shabby little green leather purse which she drew from an old-fashioned, bead-embroidered reticule that dangled limply from her arm.

Mr. Francis shot out a protesting hand.

"Good gad!" he cried, "always careless and improvident like them all. Count them girl—count them—" he commanded sharply. "Your class is so—there, there, it always loses and never makes money. I've no patience with it."

Matilda stared at him in blank surprise. She could not conceive what she had done to put the lawyer so out of humour.

"Why should I count them?" she asked. And she was quite as puzzled, as he was put out.

"You told me there were fifteen sovereigns there."

"I know I did."

"And, and, I bit the ten shillings—for luck, you know, as well as to see if it was good. Oh, that's bad grammar. I should have said—if it were good."

Her cheerful manner indicated that in her opinion he was a friend; and therefore his word was ample for her. He had said there were fifteen pounds; so—fifteen pounds there must be. But Mr. Francis, trained in a more worldly and sterner school, whilst duly appreciating the delicacy of the implied compliment, felt it incumbent on him to point out that in an affair of business such as this was, such conduct as hers was most irregular, to say the least of it. He leant back in his chair and regarded her gravely over the top of his spectacles.

"In the first place," he began, "you must not bite money—no matter what your motive is—it is a most insanitary habit, and low—very low."

This pronouncement distressed Matilda and she flushed up.

"Again, in matters of business, you should, nay, must, always verify statements made to you—no matter by whom those statements are made. Further, you should never sign

a document without reading it over and endeavouring to understand it to the best of your ability."

"But," objected Matilda, "legal documents have no stops, and that's so confusing."

"That doesn't matter at all."

"Doesn't it?"

"Besides," continued Mr. Francis, "how do you know I told you the truth?"

This was a tremendously upsetting idea to Matilda; a real poser. She turned the matter over in her mind.

"You looked truthful," she ventured timidly at last.

"Pooh, nonsense," said Mr. Francis, destroying her house of cards with a ruthless hand.

Matilda's little gesture was eloquent of surprised dejection.

"Well," she confessed, "I may have been mistaken. Although I cannot see any reason why it shouldn't have been the truth. I always knew hackney coachmen told lies—especially in London—though they are not very truthful at Dover, but not lawyers! Oh, surely not such clever people as lawyers. Don't they always speak the truth?"

"Hum," returned Mr. Francis, and, perhaps a little touched by a confidence that was so innocent, added: "There are lawyers *and* lawyers. But one never knows."

After which, to Matilda, exceedingly cryptic remark, he removed his gold-rimmed spectacles from his legal nose and began to polish them vigorously with a corner of his bandana handkerchief.

"You mustn't believe in everyone, my dear child. I am sorry to say this wicked world is full of rogues."

Matilda nodded thoughtfully.

"Miss Agnes Nixon," she began, "you know—the youngest one who always wore long earrings that dangled—Miss Agnes always insisted that the clergy and lawyers were the most exact and accurate people in the world; because, she said, the clergy guided our souls, and the men of law——"

Here Matilda paused to gaze with the utmost respect at Mr. Francis——

"The men of law had the hard task of guiding our steps in this deceitful, hurrying, crowded world. Those were her very words. So you see she considered the world a bad place to live in just as you do; although it can be very beautiful," ended Matilda with a little sigh.

Mr. Francis, his spectacles now polished to the required degree of brilliancy, replaced them carefully on his handsome nose.

"There's nothing wrong with the world——"

"Except earthquakes and snakes," interrupted Matilda, "of course, they occur only in foreign parts."

"It's the people in it," finished Mr. Francis, ignoring the interruption. "There's a lot of wrong thinking about, one way and another."

"Miss Agnes was of that opinion, too," returned Matilda. "Indeed?"

"Yes, she said the generality of mankind were loose thinkers; careless and inefficient in consequence. I was *it*—you know, inefficient. How I hated that word. She could always tell by the way people remembered to wind up their watches at night. All the parlour boarders had watches. Of course, as a pupil teacher, I was allowed no watch. But Miss Agnes knew I was all wrong without a watch."

"Dear me!" said Mr. Francis.

But here Matilda's eyes fell on her forgotten purse of gold into which she had so reprehensibly stuffed her money.

"That's another thing I can buy with my fifteen pounds," she cried, "a really beautiful watch."

And, thus reminded of her little fortune, she as quickly and impulsively pulled all the sovereigns out of their resting place; and, with a careless vigour that caused Mr. Francis to shudder inwardly and augur the worst for Matilda in the years to come, she threw them all down on the table amongst the legal documents and books of

reference. Unperceived by her, one coin fell off the table and rolled silently away across the blue and red Turkey carpet to the farthest corner of the room, where by the massive mahogany door it came to a stop; just by a couple of large black japanned boxes that stood against the wall there—boxes which bore the name of the Duc de Lorgny on their sides in square white lettering. Unconscious of her loss, Matilda now began to count over her wealth as the lawyer had desired her.

"One—two—three—four, five," she counted industriously; whilst Mr. Francis, again grave and impassive as the Sphinx, watched her and the process at the same time.

Up to fourteen she counted—twice. Into three little piles she set the money. Again she counted each pile—biting the ten shillings thoughtfully the while, till Mr. Francis reached out and took it from her: placing it in a little solitary mound of its own. Then she looked at him with great, solemn eyes.

"You were quite right," she announced in awe-struck tones and with the utmost gravity. "I mean you were all wrong."

"Eh," said Mr. Francis.

"There's only fourteen of 'em." Matilda indicated the three little piles with a scornful and perfunctory wave of the hand. "Now, what do we do?" she asked.

And even in the shock of this discovery that apparently Mr. Francis, her old friend, had designed to cheat her, the lawyer was amused to realize that his seeming turpitude obviously did not greatly trouble her peace of mind.

In fact she was quite openly going to throw the burden of further action on him. What do *we* do now, indeed? A pound or two one way or the other was not going to worry Matilda, he could see.

In his turn Mr. Francis laughed till he had to take off his spectacles again, and wipe his eyes with the famous bandana.

"Oh, Matilda, Matilda," he chuckled; and then he fell to

laughing again whilst Matilda waited a little puzzled, but patient, for the seizure to pass.

Finally he pulled himself together.

"What do we do now?" he repeated drily, "Why, we hunt for the one we lost." And he pointed across the room to the tin deed boxes.

Matilda shot him a look.

"I'm so glad," she said sweetly.

"Over there," continued Mr. Francis, "between those document cases marked with a French name you will find your missing——"

"Fortune," she gaily finished for him. "I'm so glad. You see I was right in trusting—you did tell the truth—of course, you do always. Anyway, no one will ever make me believe you don't. That horrid pound must have rolled away. I shall buy a pair of ugly, stout, boots with it. And, yes, it was abominably careless of me, too. So perhaps I ought to put it in the plate on Sunday. What do you think?"

And with that, not waiting for a reply, she ran lightly across the room and bent down to retrieve the adventurous and missing coin in order to restore it to its proper place on the top of the third pile of coins on the table. The sovereign in her hand, flushed and smiling, she turned once more to Mr. Francis.

"And who may the Duc de Lorgny be—when he's at home?" she asked.

Before he could reply, she had dropped a little curtsey to the unresponsive boxes. Matilda's movements, as Miss Janet Nixon had so often complained, were entirely too rapid. The flight of a bird was not more sudden. And Matilda was not a bird: as the worthy lady had taken pains to point out on more than one occasion.

"I have to thank Monseigneur for returning me my own," she said.

Such levity and such curiosity on a subject with which she had nothing whatever to do, however carelessly put

her question had been, displeased Mr. Francis. It argued in her a state of mind most unbecoming in one about to become an instructor of youth. He therefore pressed his lips and drew his brows together till they seemed to meet in one immense arch and replied, coldly enough, that His Grace was an old and valued client of the firm's. He pronounced the last word as though each letter was a capital. But his tone did not unduly impress Matilda.

"I like the name," she said, returning to the table with that light, dancing step for which she was so famous in after years. And for the second time she began to gather up her money.

"Your likes and dislikes are of no importance," replied the lawyer severely. "If you remember, the words of St. Paul, the Apostle, leave no doubt as to the fate of those who mind other people's business——"

Matilda opened her eyes widely.

"There's just one thing I like about St. Paul," she said, "he told the children to obey their parents, but he also added the parents were not to provoke their offspring to wrath. He could see both sides of a question, and I expect by parents he meant the Misses Nixons just as much as real parents. But what has he to do with your French duke?" she ended.

"Your unnecessary interest in a total stranger, and a male at that, leads me to believe it would be well for you to lay to heart one of the Apostle's most important precepts."

"Oh," said Matilda, "but I'm not quite sure which one you allude to, Mr. Francis."

"The one I mentioned just now, which desires you to study to be quiet and to mind your own business," he quoted impressively.

"That's the one I hate the most," declared Matilda.

Mr. Francis shrugged his shoulders, rose from his chair slowly, and took up a commanding position on the hearth-rug.

"As I mentioned before, my dear child, your likes and dislikes do not very greatly matter."

"But they may," objected Matilda.

"Pooh," said Mr. Francis.

"But why not?" demanded Matilda, plaintively, replacing her now bulging purse in her reticule, and reseating herself in her original chair.

"Because you are too young for one thing——"

"But I have reached years of discretion."

"And you are too inexperienced for another," continued Mr. Francis from his vantage ground and warming his coat-tails as he spoke.

"And furthermore, you are now, I regret to say, likely to be, as far as one can judge, always in a more or less dependent position."

There was a dead pause.

"Unless, of course, you marry—er—er—suitably," he added a little lamely.

At this point in the conversation and at this precise moment the excellent man of law experienced yet another shock. Seldom had he been present at such an unusual, and he might add, indecorous interview. For unless his eyes deceived him greatly Matilda was now in the act of making a perfectly hideous face; and making that appalling grimace at him.

"Good gad!" cried Mr. Francis, bereft of all his wonted calm. "Good gad! I thought I was in some land where etiquette was not observed. And what would the Misses Nixon say?"

Matilda faced him with a demure air for a moment; and then——

"I suppose nobody ever dared to make a face at you before," she cried.

Mr. Francis hastened to assure her that no one ever in all his experience— And the sense of outrage growing in him, he added bitterly:

"It was most unbecoming in a young gentlewoman—most

unbecoming—extraordinarily so—in more senses than one.”

Confronted with the heinousness of her behaviour, Matilda sighed.

“It was only a very little grimace,” she murmured, looking on the floor.

Mr. Francis refused to be conciliated by this information in any way.

“It made you uncommon plain,” he remarked with a coldness that was glacial.

“Oh, dear,” said Matilda.

“And it was not the act of a well-bred young lady.”

Here Matilda fancied herself listening to the familiar tones of Miss Sara Ann Nixon. But just as she was resigning herself to another sermon, Mr. Francis started to chuckle, and then he dismissed the whole affair.

“A clown’s behaviour,” he said. “That’s it, the behaviour of a clown. Appropriate enough in a circus. Come, come, I’m wasting time, my child—valuable time. Time with me is money.”

“How lovely,” murmured Matilda a little wistfully.

“Have you put your money away safely?” continued Mr. Francis. Matilda nodded, indicating her reticule with the bronze and green bead dragon sewed upon its shiny silk surface.

“Then as I have now explained everything to you, my dear, it is time you were getting along.” And Mr. Francis made a step towards the bell rope. But Matilda stayed him with an abrupt, almost imperious, gesture.

“Please, please, wait a moment,” she begged. “It’s all so strange and new: I begin to feel a little bewildered. This is my first place as a nursery governess, you see. I suppose I’m not clever enough for anything else. Although I love dancing. At the Swallow’s Nest they all thought me a little fool—particularly at arithmetic. Do you think those children will be very clever at arithmetic?” she ended almost breathlessly as she watched Mr. Francis with anxious eyes.

But the lawyer was unable to reassure her on this point. He shook his head doubtfully.

"I have not seen much of Her Grace's younger children," he said. "I have heard—but where I forget—that they are supposed to be the naughtiest children in London. But that, even if it should be so, sheds no light on their arithmetical talents."

"No," said Matilda.

"The present Duke is a minor; he is at Eton, but I don't seem to have heard that he is a shining light where study is concerned."

"But I'm not going to be his governess," Matilda pointed out.

"True, true," said Mr. Francis. "Now Lady Victoria English is about your own age—I do not imagine you will see much of her."

"Is she pretty?" asked Matilda.

"Some people think her so," replied Mr. Francis. "But, my child," he continued, anxious to lose no opportunity of improving the occasion, "beauty is we know but skin deep; and it is undoubtedly better to be good than beautiful."

"It would be delightful to be both," sighed Matilda.

"But very rare," replied Mr. Francis. "Look after the goodness, and let the beauty take care of itself."

"But it never does—in history," objected Matilda.

Then she added pensively, "I wish my parents had not had quite such a plain child."

Mr. Francis looked at her in an astonishment he would have been incapable of feeling even two hours previously.

"Nonsense," he said with decision. And again, "Stuff."

Matilda opened her eyes. People certainly were very odd—here was Mr. Francis vexed again.

"But about this arithmetic—" began the lawyer.

Matilda's air altered, she no longer looked worried; and across her features spread a radiant light of hope.

"I have an idea," she cried, and clapped her hands.

Mr. Francis took his hand off the bell rope.

"An idea," he repeated.

"Yes," returned Matilda, firmly.

"Let's hear it," said Mr. Francis. And he took up his position once more on the hearth-rug.

"An idea—about this dreadful arithmetic," explained Matilda.

"Well?"

Matilda looked round the room. Then she lowered her voice. "Of course there are always keys," she continued. "How stupid I was not to think of that at once. And how absurd to be afraid."

Mr. Francis stared at her.

"Keys?" he repeated vaguely, "keys?"

"Yes, keys."

"But what have keys got to do with addition and subtraction?"

"Oh, a great deal," she returned, "you look up the answers to the questions in the keys, you know."

"Nonsense, nonsense."

Her plan was now plain as a pikestaff to Mr. Francis; and, like that weapon of offence, extremely unpleasant. But there was no mistaking her intention. It was non-moral in the highest degree. In short, there was an atmosphere of mental legerdemain that left the most painful impression on the eminent solicitor. Keys, indeed! What was the world—the scholastic world—coming to?

"Keys are very useful," Matilda broke in on his thoughts. "But they don't always show the workings, which is a nuisance."

Thus the immoral young person. Obviously this reflection worried her; and for a moment or two she revolved the matter in her mind.

"I shall have to skip some of those examples," she decided at last. But when she looked at Mr. Francis for applause, she found he was far from agreeing with this solution of her arithmetical problems. His perturbation revealed itself in a series of deprecatory "Hums and Haws"; and then with

some eloquence he begged her not to take any such course of action as she appeared to contemplate.

Matilda was frankly amazed. "Why not?" she demanded.

The whole thing was so simple and satisfactory to her mind. Little did she know what she had started by that innocent question.

"Why not?" repeated Mr. Francis. "Because it is a kind of cheating. Because you are paid to work out your problems, not to shirk them. Because application can and does overcome the greatest difficulties. Because you are going to have the moulding of young lives in your little hands——"

Involuntarily Matilda glanced at the hands in question. It was pleasant to know Mr. Francis thought her hands passable. Too often she had been reminded of the length of her fingers. Predatory, Miss Sara Ann had called them.

"And your responsibility will be very great," almost roared Mr. Francis who had intercepted her complacent and lingering glance.

"Because you, absurd as it may seem, are in a position of trust. Because in short you must keep the flag flying——"

"Or go down with the ship," finished Matilda; neatly if unexpectedly.

This nautical simile plainly tickled her fancy and she smiled genially at Mr. Francis. But he was too much in earnest to allow himself to be diverted from the paths of rectitude by any simile, however apt.

"Most decidedly," he continued, "duty must always come first, whatever your inclination may be. In fact, I see those four little letters before you always."

"But that will be dreadfully monotonous," Matilda. "I shall never be able to enjoy myself

"We aren't sent on this earth to enjoy ourselves.

"Oh, dear," said Matilda. "How provoking it all is.

But her evident distress did not affect Mr. Francis.

"Such sentiments of slipshod carelessness are deplorable

"a young woman of your age," he warned her. "And one that has her way to make, too."

He was about to add that having warmly recommended Matilda for the situation she was now about to enter, as one who was unusually conscientious and painstaking, such revolutionary talk of "keys"—adventitious aids to teaching, indeed—filled him with disquiet. But on second thought he decided not to develop this text too much. He would hold a watching brief. Best so. And after all it was only a child. So it was with real fatherliness in his voice and manner that he went on.

"My child, believe me, you cannot be too circumspect of your behaviour at Tilney House. On what you do there may depend all your future life. Let me beg of you to work out all your sums. Example is better than precept. And a shirker never gets very far in this world."

Matilda was ready to admit as much too. And yet the vice, excellent as it was, obviously fell on stony ground, recommending itself in no wise to her.

"I said she with decision, "let those children get on without me. Now can I? Which they certainly would do if I knew I was shaky in sums."

"But are you're not shaky in sums."

said Matilda, "and in geography too. But I don't know where the Bay of Fundy is."

"I don't want to," declared Mr. Francis warmly.

"It's not in Ireland. That's where I thought it was. It's the sound, you know. I'm sure it was originally named after me. It's where the tides come in, you know."

"It doesn't interest me in the least," said Mr. Francis.

"But I must do these sums—promise me."

"I won't make no rash promises," rejoined Matilda, "for I don't know what's queer. You think they're coming right—and it seems to happen: and where are you?"
 "I don't know," she made it clear to Mr. Francis that she must do the dirty work; and she would, at her own bidding, in the privacy of her own apartment at dead

of night, look up the answers quite shamelessly in the key; marking the result of her pupils' work right or wrong: as the case might prove.

"And I shall rather enjoy doing that," she said ingenuously. "And surely it's better to be certain of the right answer."

Mr. Francis shook his head. Such sophistry he felt was more than dangerous.

"Two wrongs do not make a right," he returned.

"Two wrongs?" asked Matilda.

"Yes," said Mr. Francis. "Sloth, and derogating from your plain duty. Have you any of these pernicious aids to learning with you?" he suddenly thundered, looking so formidable, standing spare and determined before the fire, that Matilda, secretly alarmed lest he should send for her box if she confessed she had any such keys lying *perdu* there, hastened to assure him that for the moment she possessed no such short cuts to knowledge of any description whatever.

"I simply haven't had a chance to buy any yet," she explained.

Mr. Francis was uncompromising.

"So much the better," he returned.

"Besides I don't know what lesson books those children employ yet," she reminded him.

Matilda was ever practical.

"True," said Mr. Francis, "that's true." And he continued to warm his coat-tails, his hands behind his back, with a relieved expression. His undisguised satisfaction amused Matilda. A sudden freakish spirit rose in her.

"But I can always buy some—with my fifteen pounds," she cried.

The result of this remark was entirely unforeseen by her.

Mr. Francis emitted a curious noise, somewhere to be accurate, between a snort and a groan. And then, "Damn the fifteen pounds," he cried testily, "I wish I'd never insisted on it."

Matilda looked up at him very earnestly.

"Don't leave out the ten shillings," she begged.

This request made him laugh once more; and with it finished his rising ill-humour.

"You are the queerest child," he cried. "I begin to wonder what your destiny will be. I'll warrant you won't remain a governess all your life? But," he shook a warning finger at her, "you won't get round everybody as easily as you do me."

"I sha'n't want to," declared Matilda. "I don't mind at all what some people think of me. I knew if I could only make you laugh—and it didn't seem fair to leave out the celebrated ten shillings, did it? Now the whole lot is in the same boat as Silas used to say. Damned!"

"Matilda," admonished Mr. Francis, "a young lady of breeding never swears."

"I'm not swearing—I'm only repeating your words. Besides I do like to be fair and just."

He abandoned the unequal contest.

"Pussy," he declared. Then he glanced at the clock flanked by the busts of Cicero and Marcus, and then he ticked away on the carved mantelpiece.

Matilda softly. "I know I must go now. I'll ring the bell, with its ugly tassel." And she rose and taking a couple of steps towards him, she stood before her and stood in an attitude of respectful attention.

"I got to be a governess," she said.

"I said Mr. Francis, regarding her with shrewdness, "you know all that is necessary for you to conform to the new situation you find yourself in."

"And your prospects as long as you behave properly should be excellent. For Her Grace is a very kind and kindly woman. And very just in her remarks to a fault with those who serve her. She is perhaps a little sharp at times, but no one

"Thank God," breathed Matilda.

"And if you do your duty——"

"No keys," murmured Matilda.

"Precisely—no keys. And if you do your duty you should have a peaceful enough existence."

Matilda raised her eyes and gazed thoughtfully out of the window. A sudden squall of rain battered against the panes.

"But I don't know that I exactly want a peaceful existence," she remarked.

"You're young," returned Mr. Francis "and don't know the value of it."

"I daresay when I am old I shall like it. But there'll be all those endless years between."

Her eyes looked at him dark and tragic with unshed tears.

"Come, come," said Mr. Francis, "this will never do. We must keep a stiff upper lip, Pussy. And now I'm going to ring for Mr. Wicks, my head clerk, who will put you and all your belongings in a hackney coach and pay the fare for you to Tilney House."

He rang the bell vigorously as he spoke.

Across Matilda's face flitted an expression of weariness and patience that touched him more than he liked to own. She looked such a little, young thing standing there, so solitary: about to part with the last remaining link between her childhood and this new life which might lead her into so many strange places. Mr. Francis was conscious of an odd constriction at his heart. She was nothing but a child after all—set over other children. Now that the actual moment of parting had come he was conscious of a rising apprehension as to what the next few years might bring her of storm and stress. For a conviction grew on him that Matilda was destined to open doors which had long been closed and locked; and she might all unknowingly precipitate a crisis any day merely because she was so young and impulsive—and he very shrewdly opined more

usually engaging. Stifling a sigh, he could only pray to heaven that her charm might remain undetected and hidden as a governess at Tilney House. At least, the Duchess being a widow and the present Duke a boy at school, there was likely to be but a very small and insignificant masculine element about the place. And in that fact probably lay Matilda's safety. But if the late Duke had been alive—Mr. Francis was relieved to remember he had been confined decently for some considerable time. He found himself wishing that all visitors to Tilney House might be feminine.

"Now remember," he said with unwonted gentleness, holding out his hand as he spoke to Matilda who placed her little paw into it most confidingly, "always recollect that where you have a real friend. I may be a bit crusty, and old-fashioned—old bachelors, such as I, are apt to go jogging through life, you know, and don't like to be disturbed perhaps Bedford Row doesn't look romantic where I am—although I may not be able to see of you—our ways must necessarily lie more or less—but I shall always be your friend and I should like to hear from you regularly——"

"I will write often," murmured Matilda, "or if it I'll get a diary—and I will tell you all that happens to me——"

"You ever find yourself in real distress of mind—real distress of mind——"

"I pondered a moment, weighing his words and patted absently her hand.

"Recollect—indeed I beg you will not hesitate to—and be sure that here in this musty old place is one man who takes an interest in you—truly of you and wishes you well—in short, will do all he can to see you through your difficulties—for difficulties I undoubtedly have—and who will place himself at your service in any hour of trial or danger, no matter

what the circumstances. Now promise me you won't forget this."

His increasing gravity did not go altogether unremarked by Matilda and the emphasis he laid on her coming to him no matter what the circumstances of any misadventure she was yet to suffer might be made a great impression on her. For there was a repressed anxiety about him that puzzled her, as, privately, she could not understand why she should be expected, like Christian, to encounter lions in so dull a by-walk as that one her feet were doomed to walk in future: her experience already, small as it was, having shown her that the teacher's life was a commonplace and repressive affair at the best of times. She was prepared to find her pupils spoilt probably, tiresome certainly. But she looked for no romantic adventures. However, she made the required promise, decided to buy at the earliest moment a watch, a large diary, and an indelible pencil, and thanked Mr. Francis softly for all he had done for her.

"That's right," he said, "you will come straight here if you ever need a friend. You won't forget?"

"No," said Matilda, "dear Mr. Francis."

"No matter what the time of day, or night,"

"Yes."

"There is always a caretaker here; and I shall give strict orders."

"I promise you," said Matilda, "and I will do my best. And I am very, very grateful to you. Good-bye."

Before he realized her intention she had bent lightly on his hand, on which a sudden uncontrollable and splash—had kissed it lightly, a very butterfly kiss and was gone.

In the doorway she almost collided with Mr. Wells; who, a prey to the most profound astonishment at what he saw, forgot for once where he was and remained on the threshold of the room uncertainly staring alternately at his employer and down the shallow Queen Anne staircase, which had swallowed up Matilda.

"The devil take you, Wicks," cried Mr. Francis, finding his voice at last.

"Yes sir, certainly sir."

"Go and see that young lady into a cab at once. And pay the fare, sir. And don't stand staring at me as if you had seen a ghost, man."

Mr. Wicks put a hand to his brow.

"But what a likeness, sir," he ventured.

And then he clattered down the staircase after Matilda, closing his employer's door less softly than was his custom.

Mr. Francis left alone stared at his hand for some moments quite unseeingly; and then, seating himself at the writing table, took up his pen and began to write slowly at first, and then more and more fluently.

At the end of half an hour he leant back in his chair.

"Now I wonder," he mused, "what the next step in the affairs of Miss Matilda Hope Horsey may be."

CHAPTER II

TREATS OF A DISCUSSION OVER A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION BETWEEN TWO LADIES

EARLY dinner in the comfortable servants' hall at Tilney House was just about concluded.

The roast mutton had been done to a turn, there had been more than a sufficiency of red currant jelly, and in which the cauliflower and potatoes had been for consumption reflected great credit on Sally kitchen maid, and proved her to have done excellent training in culinary matters. And more this, and on the top—as it were painting the had also appeared a most delectable jam roly—had been so much appreciated that not a morsel remained. Possibly, therefore, because she had enjoyed “these mercies,” as the grace before meat by the butler described the menu, but chiefly because she was in consequence of her late exerting a thought drowsy and possibly—not to put point upon it—replete, Mrs. Lake, the majestic ruler of the Tilney House staff, was for once in monly tolerant mood. To assert that a lazy enfolded her would only be stating the case in yet conservative, terms.

So good-humoured did she feel that having, pressed it, “nothing special in the way of sweet dining-room on her mind for the evening,” she ready to relax her usual stern rule that no one was at table once the meal was finished. She, there draining to the last drop her second glass of mild

ore to give the usual signal of dismissal. Instead, turning Mr. Bartie, the ducal and portly butler, she intimated at such mundane things as appetites having been satisfied, she was now prepared to aid the processes of digestion by lingering for a short space and indulging in a seemly and decent interchange of ideas.

"But, mark you, harmless the talk must and ever shall be; or I'll be no party to it. As sure as my name is Jemima Lake."

The great Mr. Bartie bent his head with a becoming gravity.

"Quite so, quite so," he agreed.

The cards thus being, as it were, dealt, each occupant of a chair at the board (and there were, in all, some eleven or twelve present, from the Duchess's confidential maid, Mrs. Lincaid, to the least scullery girl) leant back more easily and prepared to toy with nuts or orange a little longer; to fold their hands, and to take if not a light snooze yet their ease from the usual immediate resumption of daily duties. For not too often did Mrs. Lake indulge herself in this manner, or permit those under her rule to do so. She being by nature, as well as policy, a strict disciplinarian and a confirmed enemy of what she characterized as "idle tittle-tattle."

"Or why does the Bible say 'let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay?' And the catechism direct 'that you shall earn and labour truly to get your own living?' No one is going to succeed in life who goes direct against Scripture." An excellent woman, Mrs. Lake, with principles based on eternal verities and endowed with much homely wisdom, so.

As for the idle chatter her soul held in abhorrence, she looked on it as a kind of mental annex to the law courts at the Old Bailey, wherein she had been heard to declare everybody knew a character was ruined every half-hour." And nine times out of ten, in her opinion, it was the innocent that suffered most damage. They didn't know how to take

care of themselves; whilst the devil could look after his own. And from these settled opinions no amount of persuasion could budge Mrs. Lake. She was as firm in these beliefs as the Rock of Gibraltar itself.

Therefore even today she uttered her warning at the start of the conversational symposium, so that afterwards no member of it should be in a position to complain of unfair treatment if in the heat of discussion he or she passed the bounds of what Mrs. Lake deemed proper, and came under the weight of her displeasure.

"Now mind—no ill-nature and no exaggerations."

She might have added with Shakespeare's Prince "treat all with modesty," and not been so far away from what she really meant. And having thus admonished those under her charge, she sat back as one who has just uttered the momentous "off" of the starter at a race. Mr. Bartie was more than ready: one can picture him champing at his bit, even. In fact as James, the second footman, afterwards observed, "the old boy fairly took the bit between his teeth and bolted down the course before you could say Jack Robinson!"

To which his colleague Albert gave it as his opinion "that old Squaretoes wouldn't have been 'uman if he hadn't rocketed off at once: seeing what he knew about the goings-on upstairs." And the young man had added very sapiently, lowering his voice with caution as he did so, for too often had he proved the saying true that credits walls with ears, "that as for the old gal she wasn't above worming out a bit of noos: and she was nosey herself in a quiet, sly-boots way."

Whatever truth there may have been in this criticism, on this occasion it is quite certain that Mrs. Lake's mildly enquiring gaze was focussed at that moment full on Mr. Bartie. But a child could see he was only too anxious to let his cat out of the bag.

And, as the smaller fry are said to imitate the actions of their betters, every other eye in the room also turned its battery on to the butler. Finding himself thus in the lime-

light was distinctly gratifying to Mr. Bartie's sense of the fitness of things, for from childhood he had been particularly susceptible to atmosphere; and to find everyone ready, nay willing, to hang upon his words was most encouraging. Mr. Bartie could do with a great deal of such encouragement. He therefore threw back his head, and fingering his half-finished glass of port, took the stage. For today he certainly had news of interest to impart.

"I really don't know what things is coming to," he sighed and pausing a moment, the better to drive his point home, continued:

"I really can't say where it will all end, I'm sure."

Mrs. Lake emitted a brisk but quite perfunctory "Lor', Mr. Bartie!" from between pursed-up lips.

This tribute, expected and received, satisfying the excellent man, he resumed.

"I don't indeed know what things is coming to, above-stairs, Mrs. Lake, ma'am. For now we are all women—we need a head. We do, indeed."

And in order to mark the sad necessity he vigorously shook his own bald and shining head with a lugubriousness that was found most impressive by the beholders.

"Women, as his late Grace used to observe—and no disrespect intended to any female here present—are the deuce. I merely repeat His Grace's dictum. They have no balance. They are ruled by their emotions. And now Lady Victoria has put up her hair and let down her frocks——"

"There's continual clashing, as you might say," nipped in Mrs. Lake.

"And not be understating the case, ma'am."

Mrs. Lake concurred in this opinion.

"Ah, she hadn't ought to have come out so young—barely seventeen."

And to this Mr. Bartie agreed with a touch of mournfulness.

"It makes a bear garden of the dining-room. That's just it—the schoolroom is the place for her. She's no perspective,

Lady Victoria. She takes things with a high 'and, a very high 'and. And it's upsetting to everyone. We miss His Grace daily—he had a way with him—a way of settling things—of looking you up and down—and shouting 'no argument, by George!' *A je ne sais quoi*, as Mamselle Hortense would put it."

And the orator bowed gallantly in the direction of Mademoiselle Hortense who, all Gallic smartness and flashing eye, suitably responded with an inclination of the utmost graciousness. As the personal maid of Lady Victoria she could speak with authority on her young lady's vagaries and humours.

"*Mais*, His Grace had his tantrums also," she observed, softly.

Mrs. Lake sniffed.

"One expects them in a man," she remarked.

"But with a young person—and that person a female—you know just what the difficulties are, Mrs. Lake, ma'am. A house divided against itself is bound to come to grief. The master's hand is sorely needed, if only to give a tone. You are well aware of what rash actions young persons are capable—none better."

Mrs. Lake's face assumed an expression of great shrewdness and understanding. She had not lived thirty years in the ducal service for nothing.

"Indeed, I do, Mr. Bartie," she replied. "I can remember when I was a young girl here in the old Duchess's time—but that wouldn't interest anyone here, now."

"Well, well," said Mr. Bartie, "be that as it may, we're all at sixes and sevens now. And His Grace not two years dead."

At this reminder of other days there ensued a general head-shaking, more especially on the part of the older women. And Mrs. Lake, raising her eyes piously to the ceiling first, and thereafter mentally heavenwards, was heard to murmur in a suitably hushed voice:

"Was it so long, indeed?"

"Two years all but six weeks," returned the butler firmly.

After a moment spent in contemplation Mrs. Lake withdrew her eyes from the near vicinity of the left-hand cornice.

"Well, well," she remarked, "time is indeed an ever rolling stream, as we sang in church only last Sunday."

"You may well say that," agreed Mr. Bartie and continued his reflections on the situation abovestairs.

"But," he went on, "although one hardly expects the mantle of Elijah to fall on two Elishas—if one might put it that way, ma'am, and no disrespect intended to his late Grace or the prophet in question—there is a reason in the roasting of eggs, as the saying goes. And, really, the way Lady Victoria behaves over this intended marriage is quite deplorable. One can hardly expect Her Grace to keep her temper. It wouldn't be 'uman."

There was a noticeably heightened air of interest about everyone as Mr. Bartie began to reach the heart of his discourse.

Lady Victoria and her approaching marriage. Here was a drama indeed.

Unwilling bride *and* bridegroom, if the truth were known: or, at best, completely indifferent to each other. What Mamselle Hortense called a marriage of convenience, meaning that it was a put-up job between the old French Duke (who, childless and immensely wealthy, designed that his great possessions should eventually enrich a lad in whom none of his own blood flowed) and his distant kinsman's widow, the present Duchess of Westmainham, who, anxious no doubt to see a troublesome daughter well settled in life, refused to listen to that daughter's plea of youth *and* inexperience; of indifference, if not actual dislike, to the project.

Mr. Bartie, remembering all this, permitted his voice to take a deeper note as he perceived the impression he was making.

"I ask myself at times where has aristocratic example

gone to? For they quarrel like cats, and that's the truth. It's enough to make one turn radical."

"So it is," agreed Mrs. Lake.

"For my part," remarked Mademoiselle Hortense, *sotto voce*, to her great friend the head housemaid, Miss Jenkins, who sat on her right, "for my part I should find it of an easiness to decide the question. I should not, how do you call it, shilly-shally, I promise you. So handsome a young man, so accomplished: so, *enfin*, so enormously wealthy already. What a position for a young lady!"

Miss Jenkins it would seem was of a like mind.

"The best match of the season and she's got him before it's begun. The Princess Royal herself couldn't do more: but then, Lady Victoria was always incurably romantic: She's got enough nonsense in that little head of hers to sink a battleship, or end by marrying the grocer. And she's not in love with him and that's the plain truth——"

She hesitated a moment, and added in a still more guarded tone:

"And she imagines she is—with someone else—as we know——"

"*Voilà*, that is it, precisely," returned Mademoiselle Hortense.

But they were unable to enlarge on the theme for although their voices had been hushed to a thread of sound, Mr. Bartie's eye was already menacingly upon them.

"You were saying something, Miss Jenkins?" he enquired in a voice of ice.

Miss Jenkins, he was glad to notice, had the grace to blush.

"Nothing, Mr. Bartie," she replied. "I beg your pardon."

Mr. Bartie acknowledged the apology with a wave of the hand: and turned again to the housekeeper. From her he knew he could rely on an unflinching attention.

"Would you credit me, Mrs. Lake, ma'am," he demanded, "if I were to tell you Her Grace and Lady Victoria are 'outs' once more?"

"Lor'," cried the housekeeper; and the entire table seemed

to echo her in a stupefaction at the news that was very encouraging to Mr. Bartie.

"Lor', you do surprise me. Why, it was only a few weeks ago they had it all out; and swore to be like sweet sisters for harmony in the future."

And Mrs. Lake's gold earrings danced again under her frilled cap, so vigorous was her head-shaking at such deplorable lack of constancy to a treaty.

"And Lady Victoria not plighted above three weeks."

"That marriage will never take place or I'm a Dutchman—and drink only Hollands," added Mr. Bartie impressively, if a trifle irrelevantly as to his metaphor.

Here James was understood to say that he would accept the challenge thrown down; and would bet on the event. Five to one—on.

Mrs. Lake could hardly believe her ears: and if Mr. Bartie had not silenced the audacious young man with a look—she would have spoken herself, and to some purpose.

"Some bets is fitting and some is not," declared Mr. Bartie.

"But what's the 'arm of this little bet?" queried James, popping up again with the suddenness of a jack-in-the-box. And his aggrieved manner implied that as far as he was aware he had merely suggested a course of action that was at least honoured by custom, if it did mark a perhaps regrettable tendency to lapse from the high standard of respectful decorum usually practised by the inhabitants of Tilney House.

"It's a fair sporting offer," he added. "Nobody'll know for certain till the last minute whether she'll win."

This was too much for Mrs. Lake.

"She? Who?" she demanded, in a voice of thunder.

But James, being young and reckless, refused to be rattled.

"Not Lady Victoria," he countered neatly. "And why jump on me today? The thing's been done often enough amongst us all."

And here he was speaking no more than the truth.

"You never do know which is going to win," he added, sulkily.

And this assertion also was not to be controverted. For in any dispute between the energetic Duchess and her eldest daughter the elements of risk and uncertainty were never lacking. To any unprejudiced onlooker there was always something sporting about these encounters. For, if the Duchess held the greater advantage in point of age, position, respect due, and so forth, her indomitable daughter showed a resource in argument that at times almost amounted to genius. She was a very Brock for verbal pyrotechnics when she chose to exert herself. And even Mr. Bartie himself had been heard to assert that in his opinion her little ladyship showed a distinct talent for strategy of a very high order. Long practice from her tenderest years had made Lady Victoria perfect.

"As pretty a fighter as one could wish to listen to," was Mr. Bartie's considered verdict.

And to show his faith in her acumen he had even gone the length, on one celebrated occasion, of favouring her to the tune of five shillings—a sum not lightly risked by him at any time.

But today he frowned on James for a forward, officious young puppy: and once more stared him into a sullen silence with a cold and glassy eye. Then—he resumed his narrative.

"Hasty, ill-considered actions will spoil anything," he continued, "perhaps you might say everything and not be far out."

Sorrowfully, Mrs. Lake agreed.

"I'm astonished," she said, "or rather you don't astonish me. For you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, I've always understood. And from a tot in muslin frocks and sashes Lady Victoria was neither to hold nor to bind—when her temper was roused. She was capable of going to any and every extreme. I've seen Mrs. Cross put her to bed

for the whole day, and the sun shining fit to burst outside—and she'd stay in her cot, too, sooner than give way."

"Ah, when females mean to fight—why they fight," returned Mr. Bartie, with conviction, "from the youngest to the oldest." A murmur of wholehearted assent from the male portion of his audience rose on the quiet air. The women, looking demurely into their laps, maintained an absolute silence.

"I often think," added Mr. Bartie, pursuing for a moment the train of reflection called into being by his own assertion, "of the wars that's been caused by females. The world would be much more peaceful if there were no women in it."

"Maybe," said Mrs. Lake, "but I fancy if you read Genesis you will find that Adam complained about the dullness of the world before they arrived."

"Well, well," said Mr. Bartie, "be that as it may, I was a bit flabbergasted at their bitterness today. And yet it all seemed, as you might say, to blow up out of nothing."

"That," remarked Mademoiselle Hortense, with a toss of her black ringlets, "was ever the way of Milady Victoria. One moment it is all smiles, the next—Oh, *mon Dieu!*"

And she raised expressive hands and eyes towards heaven.

"But what did it all begin about?" suddenly asked Jane Gibbs, the second housemaid, who up to then had not uttered a word.

Mr. Bartie considered for a moment, a little taken aback at thus being pulled up. The implication that he had been wandering from his point was not a soothing one to his self-esteem. After a moment's perceptible hesitation he replied with a certain loftiness, "It began of all things about the hentree, I think, Jane Gibbs."

On hearing this Mrs. Lake stiffened perceptibly in her chair; whilst the rest of the household repressed a tendency to smile. They were none of them above relishing a criticism of their ruler and her works—the martinet Mrs. Lake.

"The entree! But how strange?" murmured Mademoi-

selle Hortense between whom and that excellent woman no undue amount of love had ever been lost.

"But you might call it the pretext, and not be far out," pursued Mr. Bartie, quite unaware of the storm he was arousing in the breast of his much-respected colleague. His was a simple and straightforward nature; and he could see no reason why he should suppress any part of the tale on which he had embarked. Not so Mrs. Lake; who, ever mindful of her position, had been listening with mounting displeasure and rising choler to his last remarks.

"What was wrong with my hentree?" she now demanded of him in a manner that Siddons herself might have envied, her professional pride touched to the quick.

Warned at last by the dark malignity of her air, Mr. Bartie now realized with an inward shudder that he was stepping, lightly enough, towards the brink of disaster.

"Nothing, ma'am, nothing, I do assure you: as hentrees go—yours was quite perfect today. But not to put too fine a point upon it the ladies were in that humour, they'd have fallen out over a plate of bread and butter, or a vol-au-vent made by one of the heavenly host, or the Archangel Gabriel himself."

"Tut," snorted Mrs. Lake, cut to the heart by any criticism, implied or spoken, of her cooking. "Ho, let me tell you, Mr. Bartie, I know nothing of the Archangel Gabriel's talents; and how you come to be so familiar with them is more than I can say—but my hentree today left me," she emphasized the personal pronoun with marked acidity, "absolutely done to a turn. Of course, what may have happened to it abovestairs is none of my business. But it left me—all right. The Queen herself could have eaten it. And I accept no blame or responsibility for it, once it got into the dumb-waiter."

"Just so, just so," rejoined Mr. Bartie, hurriedly escaping from the topic, and he resumed the thread of his narrative before the irate woman could add another word.

"Lady Victoria began it by stating she hated sweet-

bread done *a la reine*: almost disloyal I thought it at the time. I think that was it, eh, James?"

He turned to his lieutenant for confirmation of his statement. James, who since his passage at arms with his chief had remained a private citizen, sulkily enough, now brightened up and, leaning forward a little, hastened to corroborate the eloquent Mr. Bartie.

"Yes, sir," he assented. "Yes, sir, that was it. And then Her Grace returns very snippily, that it's of no consequence what her little ladyship likes or dislikes as she's too young to have formed tastes—a chit of seventeen—and when she's older she'll know better. And after that they were off like race-horses; and you couldn't see their 'eels for dust. It was a mercy they was lunching en gassoon, as you might say."

Again the whole table was wreathed in delighted smiles; a tribute to what they knew to be James' accuracy in painting the scene he had witnessed so recently. But Mr. Bartie did not share the general feeling of admiration for so pretty a piece of description. He was much more of the opinion that James again was taking too much on himself. Mr. Bartie himself was the proper person to relate the tiff at lunch, if anyone was, and James must be made to understand that, immediately. Mr. Bartie therefore arrested that young man's eloquence with an uplifted and dramatic hand, and uttering a stony "That will do, James, I thank you," resumed the recital himself. "I could see Her Grace was not too pleased when she sat down to luncheon; and Lady Victoria was in one of those nasty teasing moods of hers. And it seemed to me as I handed the soup that she wasn't wearing her engagement ring."

A series of looks pregnant with meaning passed round the board.

"But as Her Grace hadn't spotted it, and her ladyship might possibly have left it on her dressing-table, I hoped for the best. But, when Her Grace had told her ladyship she thanked Providence she was no daughter of hers either

in looks, or character, or temper, but took after her father's family entire, and her Great-aunt Anne in everything but her good looks; and Lady Victoria replied she was relieved to hear it, for her one dread from infancy had ever been she might grow up like 'er Ma's people, especially her uncle that died so oddly in China, Thomas— Well, after that they were at it 'ammer and tongs. And after a bit of a breather on the straight—since we are using racing metaphors," conceded Mr. Bartie, "in which I really think Her Grace had the best of it—she's so ingenious at bringing up Lady Victoria's misdoings since she was born, and 'er little ladyship does so 'ate being reminded of when she turned the taps of the new bath running till the water overflowed and went down the stairs like a second Niagara Falls and ruined the landing Brussels—and when she put her bow and arrers through her Great-aunt Georgina in the inner 'all, and took pounds off the picture's value—and when she tipped 'is present Grace, at the early age of four, into the 'ip bath in his best sealskin coat and beaver 'at with the tassels 'is Ma had had sent over from Paris special,—I knew what we was in for, only too well. And sure enough they settled down to it: and went round the bend and up the rise, as you might say, into the straight, neck *and* neck. For by this time they 'ad each got their 'eads and was thoroughly enjoying of themselves."

At this point Mr. Bartie was forced to pause in order to take breath after his rhetorical effort. But now no one dreamt of interrupting. Everyone was far too anxious to learn what the absence of Lady Victoria's diamond and sapphire ring might portend. So after a moment devoted to sipping delicately from his half-full glass of port, the butler resumed:

"We had got to the sweets—sweets do I call 'em? Bitters would have met the requirements of the case far better, when Her Grace, by this time well in her stride and moving freely, as you might call it, leaves behind mere reminiscences of Lady Victoria's childhood, and 'aving eaten a

remarkably good meal, feels it time to bring the 'istory more up to date. And so taking a sip of claret," here Mr. Bartie, like the Shakespearean scholar he was, suited the action to the word and the word to the action, "she puts down her glass as I do mine, and she starts on what she calls Lady Victoria's deplorable propensity for liking the wrong people. 'For there's nothing more destructive to a social success, in a young woman,' says she. And she was very eloquent on the theme, was the Duchess. But it's a dangerous topic as we all know, eh, Mrs. Lake, ma'am? But Lady Victoria says nothing for a bit, only sits there tossing her head like a young pony. Then Her Grace begs Lady Victoria very earnest not to continue in her foolish ways but to drop some people we could name easily, but won't. And then Lady Victoria looks blank and puts her finger to her lips. 'I'm sure I don't know to whom you're referring, Mama,' says she, very clear and scornful."

And Mr. Bartie gave a very fair imitation of Lady Victoria's voice and manner.

"And then," he continued, "for the first time Her Grace notices her little ladyship's ring finger."

"Well?" asked Mrs. Lake.

"'I wish you wouldn't leave your rings about always,' says Her Grace, 'you're not fit to be trusted with jewelry. Where's your engagement ring?' And then the blow falls swift and sudden and unexpected; or I'm no judge of faces. 'I left it, dear Mama, in our pew at St. George's, Hanover Square, during the morning service on Sunday,' almost coos Lady Victoria. 'What!' cries Her Grace. And I could see she hardly believed her ears. 'And I'm not engaged any more,' continues her exasperating little ladyship as cool as a cucumber, 'for I told Doodles on Saturday night all was over between us and I should leave the ring in our pew next morning. And he could fetch it or not as he liked.' You should have seen Her Grace's face," finished Mr. Bartie. "I thought she was at least going to have a fit of apoplexy."

"My goodness gracious me!" cried Mrs. Lake. "You don't mean it, Mr. Bartie. Here's a pretty kettle of fish, indeed!"

Mr. Bartie nodded in grave accent.

"As pretty a kettle of fish as I have ever seen in this house," he replied, slowly.

"Well, for goodness sake, go on," urged the housekeeper. "Don't keep us all on tenterhooks. What happened then?"

"The way Her Grace pulled herself together was nothing short of wonderful. You could see she had decided on her course of action immediate," returned Mr. Bartie.

"Her Grace is not so easy beaten," remarked Miss Jenkins.

"Nor she is," admitted Mr. Bartie, "but I could see she was going to play for time. 'Well, Victoria,' says she, 'you are a very silly girl to indulge in these childish misunderstandings with the man who is to be your husband. For Doodles,' says she, giving 'im that silly name I can't a-bear, 'is a sad flirt and a very lightheaded young man. And one of these days, my dear, he'll take you at your word and some other girl will catch him on the rebound. For it's been borne in on me lately that he's—slipping, Victoria; and you'll look a pretty fool if he leaves you in the lurch—jilted.'"

"Ah!" cried Mademoiselle Hortense. "Her ladyship would hate that. That was clever."

"If looks could have killed," he answered, "we should be enjoying the spectacle of a slap-up funeral, feathers and 'osses, and all. For the idea of being 'left,' as you might say, was very distasteful to Lady Victoria, I could see—very distasteful, indeed. 'But I left the ring in the pew,' she cried, 'not Doodles.' 'Yes, I quite understand you behaved like an ill-bred fool,' snaps Her Grace, rubbing it in. 'And I suppose this afternoon I must go and see him about it. It's too bad of you, I declare, Victoria.' But this was too much for her little ladyship. She rises up, very straight and very impressive, and walks to the door in

silence. Then she turns, and her eyes flashed like diamonds, 'Mama,' says she, 'I'd have you know that Doodles is nothing to me, one way or the other—as far as I am concerned he can go to—to Peru if he wishes; or he can marry me, or anyone else—the new nursery governess, if you like. But I won't stand his silly self-sufficient ways. And you can tell him so.' And with that, she'd gone, slamming the door behind her. And her Ma was left—planted, as you might say."

"What beats me," said Mrs. Lake, "is how she could keep it all quiet from Sunday morning till today? Oh, she's artful, is Lady Victoria, as artful as my old puss. Well, well, it's time we were moving."

She directed a look at the clock on the mantelpiece as she spoke. "Half-past two," she remarked, "we mustn't waste any more time. You Polly, go and wash up, immediate." Having thus dismissed the assembly and having learnt all she wanted to know, she sailed majestically from the room at the very moment that a violently rung bell pealed through the basement. Her hand on the door-knob she paused.

"Her Grace's own bell," said Mrs. Lake, "and she sounds a bit put out still," she observed drily.

CHAPTER III

SHOWS SOMETHING OF THE DUCHESS'S MIND: AND INTRODUCES
THE LADIES CAROLINE AND CHARLOTTE

THE vibrations of the shrill and peremptory summons had hardly died away before Mrs. Kincaid, the Duchess's valued, and indeed confidential, maid, rose from her chair, and, to all seeming blandly unmoved by the possibilities hinted at in Mrs. Lake's exit speech, in her turn left the scene of the late symposium. Catfooted, she pursued her deliberate way up the backstairs to the first floor landing of Tilney House. For on this floor the private apartments of Lady Victoria's redoubtable mama were situated. And here Mrs. Kincaid paused for a moment to take breath, and, as it were, arm herself for the encounter—if there was to be one—before her. Nor did she attempt to hurry herself unduly. That she was, perhaps, a shade late in entering, for once, on her usual afternoon duties she was prepared to allow; but that her tardiness was at all extreme or in any way merited harsh reproof—which might be her immediate portion—she was not equally ready to concede. Still she was willing, and expected to have, to make a liberal allowance for the heat of the moment where the Duchess was concerned. An impulsive creature she knew her to be: whether in good or bad humour. And—that Lady Victoria could be very exasperating it was only fair to admit. Smiling a ghost of a smile at her thoughts, Mrs. Kincaid moved once more firmly down the landing and halting before the Duchess's bedroom door knocked gently upon it.

There was a moment's pause; and then a sharp voice

bidding her enter issued clearly from behind its massive mahogany panels.

Mrs. Kincaid, sedate and composed, turned the handle and walked into the, to her, so well known and stately room.

A pale, wintry gleam of sunlight, suddenly come and as soon to be gone again, had fallen across the floor just touching the figure by the window with its uncertain brightness.

The Duchess Adelaide, a handsome creature in her early forties, with a beauty of what has been aptly described as "the rocking-horse order," was seated at her dressing-table, which stood, as handsome and imposing as its owner, between the two great windows at the far end of the room. She was, Mrs. Kincaid observed between discreet eyelids, at the moment engaged in powdering her aquiline nose; and, at the same time, was frowning heavily at her reflection in the highly polished mirror: an ominous sign.

Mrs. Kincaid shut the door behind her and advanced with a precision that was almost military into the very centre of the Turkey carpet.

"Your Grace rang—" she began.

"Yes," snapped Her Grace without turning her elaborately dressed head, "and more than once."

After a second she added coldly:

"Believe I broke the bell rope."

Mrs. Kincaid's eyes sought the article mentioned.

The Duchess's impression was not without foundation. For there, in a huddled mass upon the hearth-rug, lay the poor thing, abandoned and derelict. Not only had it been pulled but it had quite obviously been unceremoniously jerked from its proper position on the wall by the fireplace with rude, nay savage, violence.

Mrs. Kincaid pursed her lips.

"Been gossiping your life away belowstairs, I suppose," suddenly thrust the Duchess.

Then she sighed heavily.

"Goodness knows there's been enough lately to turn 'em all goggle-eyed."

"I have not been gossiping," returned Mrs. Kincaid firmly, and she stressed the personal pronoun a shade. "It's a pure waste of time."

"But you've been listening to their cackle," retorted the Duchess.

And then without any warning she leant back in her chair and started to laugh, with great heartiness.

"You should have seen old Bartie's moon face—handing the dishes and things. But there, I expect you know as much about it as I do. And the whole affair's lost nothing in the telling. Come, confess, you left 'em at it, hammer and tongs."

Mrs. Kincaid crossed to the fireplace and bent to retrieve the bell rope.

"When I left the servant's hall, Your Grace," she rejoined decidedly, "Mrs. Lake had sent them all about their business."

The Duchess launched a shrewd glance in the direction of her maid.

"Ah," said she in a tone of complete comprehension, "you grow more like an oyster every day."

Undisturbed by the announcement Mrs. Kincaid made reply:

"An oyster's a good thing to be at times."

And she began to fold up with methodical care the long piece of embroidered velvet she had picked up. But the Duchess was not to be so put off.

"You needn't pretend," she cried irritably, "that you don't know about Victoria's latest piece of folly."

And at last Mrs. Kincaid, cornered, was forced to admit to that young lady's incensed mama that she had heard—something.

"Not that I take much notice of what they say downstairs," she ended.

The Duchess shrugged impatient shoulders.

"She left her ring—in the pew—on Sunday—to be called for—" jerked out Lady Victoria's parent.

"Indeed," said Mrs. Kincaid, "a foolish bairn."

But this was not sufficient at all.

"A more childish and idiotic action I have never heard of," cried Her Grace. "The act of a laundress, I should imagine. Where on earth did she learn such suburban ways of going on, tell me that, Kincaid?"

But Mrs. Kincaid professed herself unable to throw any light on the dark doings of Lady Victoria. Her unconventional manœuvres being always completely beyond her powers of understanding, she confessed. However she advised Her Grace of Westmainham to lay the fault at the door of her daughter's extreme youth. The Duchess would remember that last year her little ladyship was in the schoolroom with her hair down. And there was no idea then of her coming out and marrying in her first season, as you might say. The bairn was like a colt and still had too much spring in her feet.

"And behaves like a colt," said the Duchess. "But to leave her ring in church to be called for, is too much of a good thing."

Mrs. Kincaid laid the now immaculately folded bell rope on a small table close at hand.

"I suppose the Marquis did fetch it," she said.

"Goodness knows," sighed the culprit's mother. "I can assure you, Kincaid, I could have cheerfully boxed Victoria's ears—well, there it is."

"It was a beautiful ring," said Mrs. Kincaid thoughtfully.

"And it's upset my whole arrangements," finished the Duchess and plunged once more into a pit of gloomy reflection the while her maid, as was her custom of an afternoon when the Duchess intended driving out, proceeded to busy herself with divers articles of wearing apparel. From various receptacles, wherein she herself had carefully disposed them, Mrs. Kincaid now, something after the manner of an expert conjuror, produced them once more. And shook and patted them into a state of perfect fashion and superlative elegance. The neat bonnet with its daintily curling

feather of violet and its broad satin strings of two shades of purple was first withdrawn from its many wrappings of tissue paper; then the long sealskin coat, sable trimmed, was triumphantly produced from the remote fastnesses of the vast mahogany wardrobe. From a striped muff box emerged the sable muff, gold chained. And finally into the light of day burst, with all their glories, those fascinating boots of which even Lady Victoria had been heard to envy her parent the possession; and to admire most enthusiastically for size, general shapeliness, and bon ton of the most *recherché* description.

Mrs. Kincaid contemplated the general effect and then a doubt suddenly assailed her.

"Will Your Grace wear the sable tippet as well?" she asked plunging back into the depths of the wardrobe once again.

"I suppose so," returned the Duchess absently, staring at herself in the glass; and as absently clapping a final load of face powder on to her already overburdened cheeks; till she bore a curious resemblance to a working miller on a very busy day.

"It's not so cold—" suggested Mrs. Kincaid, withdrawing from the wardrobe at last; and hesitating for a moment before she laid the article referred to on the flowered quilt of the great four-post bed beside the other garments already assembled there. For it was obvious to the meanest intelligence that Her Grace's thoughts were, so to speak, wool-gathering; and that, for all she realized Mrs. Kincaid might have suggested with perfect propriety her wearing a ball dress instead of a tippet—and gained her careless assent to the donning of such a garment equally indifferently. "You're sure you won't feel too warm in all that fur?" ventured Mrs. Kincaid.

"Yes—no," returned the Duchess, and relapsed into silence leaving her maid entirely at a loss to fathom her meaning.

With a shade of apprehension Mrs. Kincaid realized that

the Duchess was formulating some plan of action in her mind. She trusted it did not bode ill for Lady Victoria.

A chiming clock struck three as, setting aside for the moment the matter of the fur tippet and leaving the question of its ultimate donning or not on the knees of the gods, she came towards the Duchess with those famous boots already mentioned; which were of the variety known as Balmoral and shone with a superb glossiness. They were further ornamented, to add to their general witchery, with tassels at each side. Works of art indeed. Mechanically the Duchess raised her beflounced silk skirts a few inches, placed her feet on a small footstool Mrs. Kincaid pushed towards her, and with a swiftly vigorous movement sent first her right shoe and then her left flying far and fast across the room. Whilst from amongst the litter on the heavily encumbered dressing-table, where brushes, combs, and powder boxes lay anyhow and anywhere, her maid sought for, and at last found, a portly silver buttonhook. Mrs. Kincaid took up the instrument. Along its shining surfaces the marks of little teeth were plainly visible. Indeed one might almost say the thing was historic: for it had enjoyed a long and useful career in Tilney House. And each of the Duchess's children had in turn cut one or more of their earliest molars upon it; from the wayward Lady Victoria herself to the last fat baby—good-humoured Lady Amelia.

Gravely, with the interesting exhibit in her hand, Mrs. Kincaid advanced and kneeling before the ever silent Duchess proceeded to invest her in her boots. Nothing broke the calm but a hot coal falling from the grate. After a moment, however, Her Grace left off staring unseeingly at her own reflection and turned her glance on to her maid's bent head and busy fingers.

Suddenly she spoke.

"How many years have you been with me?" she demanded abruptly.

Mrs. Kincaid sat back on her heels to consider.

"It would be—let me see—I came the year after Your Grace was married," she returned, "and before Lady Victoria was born. Nigh on eighteen years, I suppose it would be. And it hardly seems a few months since she was shortened——"

She glanced at the buttonhook in her hand as she spoke.

"There's her tooth mark to this day," she said.

"Oh, Lord," cried the Duchess, "and now I've got six of 'em. And the Duke's dead—well, he couldn't say I wasn't a good wife to him, eh?"

And Her Grace of Westmainham gazed reflectively across the wide spaces of the warmly fire-lit room to where on the wall facing her, near the bed, there hung an oil painting of a good-looking man dressed in the uniform of the Life Guards and adorned with a tremendous pair of flaxen side whiskers. Apart from these, which were striking indeed in their luxuriance, his features were ordinary but for a pair of vivid blue eyes which dominated the entire painting.

"I suppose you might say he was cut off in his prime," continued the Duchess in an even tone that betokened no undue sense of regret or loss at the comparative early demise of her late lord.

"Although I can't bear the expression myself; for it always reminds me somehow of a Sunday sirloin of beef, with Yorkshire pudding and horseradish sauce. And now I come to think of it, he was rather like a Sunday dinner, wasn't he? So solid, and a bit dull, eh, poor soul. But of course he couldn't help that. I wonder what he's doing now. Leaning over some heavenly stile looking at celestial cows, I suppose."

This picture tickled Mrs. Kincaid's sense of humour not a little but she suppressed a smile and replied, that doubtless His Grace had gone on to another realm altogether. Where, quite possibly, his present pursuits were of an entirely different character to anything he had indulged in during his earthly career.

"But one doesn't miss him as much as one might," pursued

the Duchess tranquilly, "and that's deplorable too, eh, Kincaid? But there, I had fifteen years on the ramparts with him, if ever a woman had. He was such a gusty soul; and what with his vagaries and digestion, one never knew where one was."

Her eyes sought the picture once more; then she added quite dispassionately and as one who states a fact not to be controverted:

"Yes, on the whole he was a very trying man."

She finished this summing up by nodding to the picture with a kind of breezy confidentialness that was rather taking—as much as to say, "Now you know at last what I think of you, my friend. And there's no nonsense about it, either."

Mrs. Kincaid turned her head and looked from the picture to her mistress and back again. "There's no denying His Grace was a fine figure of a man," she said. And then she finished buttoning the last boot button, emitted a short laugh, and rose to her feet. "But he stood no contradiction," she ended.

The Duchess nodded. Very well she knew that her late lord invariably took his own way and cared not a jot for other people's feelings.

"Lady Victoria I think sometimes is the image of her poor father," she remarked gazing contemplatively at her now neatly shod extremities. "Particularly as to the hands and feet. Her colouring is of course mine."

Now the late Duke had not shone as to the members indicated; and nothing enraged Lady Victoria more than to be reminded that she alone of all his progeny possessed the detested Westmainham hands and feet; of which the Duchess too constantly assured her in good set terms and at very inconvenient moments. As, for instance, when she was on the point of going to a dance, or about to play in a croquet match.

"Well, well, he's gone. And Frederick the younger reigns in his stead—as they said of the Kings of Israel in the

Bible," she ran on carelessly, "I often think it's very bad for the boy to be——"

"Such a young Duke?" finished Mrs. Kincaid seeing that the Duchess hesitated.

"Exactly," she replied, beginning to make hay of those drawers in which were usually bestowed her gloves, handkerchiefs, and ribbons.

"And as there's really no man in the family," she continued, "to whom I can turn for guidance but poor George Asshington—and he's nothing but a tailor's dummy—one of these days I shall have to marry again, I suppose, in sheer self-defence."

She fished a pair of grey gloves out of the welter she had created, as she made the announcement, with an airy unconcern that was all her own. But her manner was that of a woman who had reached a decision after long cogitations on a supremely tiresome subject.

"Ah," said Mrs. Kincaid, "it's a step it's well to think over."

And her air was as perfectly non-committal as she could make it, whilst she took very good care not to enquire as the Duchess, she was quite well aware, expected her to—as to whether Her Grace had a suitable partner in her mind's eye or not. Because she knew from past experience that a bolt shot off at a tangent, such as this one seemed to be, was better left alone. It might mean anything or nothing; and the least said the soonest forgotten. For with the Duchess conversation too often crystallized an idle idea into a settled determination: occasionally with disastrous results.

"And yet liberty is very precious," mused the Duchess, "and it's long odds but I'd get some queer character. And now no one, thank Heaven, can say I didn't do my duty by the Duke to the best of my ability," she finished off piously.

In which estimate of her late married life Mrs. Kincaid was able to concur with much heartiness.

"Husbands are like crocodiles," remarked the Duchess

moving over to one of the windows as she spoke, whence she looked down idly into the deserted garden below. "They look like logs and harmless—till they wake up: and you never know what will make them wake up. And then they start immediately, without rhyme or reason, snapping to right and left, like mad."

Her eyes roved over the lawn reflectively; for Tilney House was, and is for that matter still, one of the few town houses that boasts a garden of quite respectable size beautified with several fine old trees, and containing, moreover, a full-sized croquet lawn; and in those days an archery stand also within its high red brick walls. For in the year of Our Lord eighteen hundred and fifty-five the Duchess Adelaide's archery meetings and croquet parties were quite a feature of the London season.

"But," continued Her Grace thoughtfully, "six children—four of whom are only girls to be sure—will be a pill for any man, Kincaid: an absolutely ready-made family." There was so much truth in the assertion that there was nothing for Mrs. Kincaid to do but to assent to its generally veracious and accurate character. For the facts were undeniably as the Duchess stated.

"Yes, an absolutely ready-made family," repeated the Duchess, "I don't know—I'm sure. The whole situation is getting rapidly beyond me. I must talk to that old sinner Antoine de Lorgny. He's sure to be over here next month when the Emperor Napoleon and his Consort come over from France."

Mrs. Kincaid nodded. She had great faith in the worldly wisdom of that eminent diplomatist and suave personage, the Duchess's distant kinsman, Monseigneur le Duc de Lorgny. Many a time and oft had he guided her out of a morass of impulsive thinking into the plain high road of sensible action. Mrs. Kincaid was very much relieved to hear he was expected and so soon. But the Duchess was pursuing her train of thought aloud and neither expected nor wished for comments on her remarks. For the moment

she merely desired an audience; an interested one if possible; but failing that a courteous and a patient.

"It is time," she observed judiciously, "high time this country recognized the ally who has stood so loyally by us in this wretched Russian business. I shall make a point of doing what I can to show my appreciation at least. And I must certainly consult Antoine; about my future. He has no morals we all know—but what perfect manners. And somehow one notices manners a great deal more. I detest your sincere brute who blurts out the truth—no matter what the occasion——"

At this point in her reflections she broke off to throw open with startling suddenness and force the window at which she was standing. A rush of bitter and damp air immediately invaded the room. But, utterly regardless of the fact that she had no wrap about her shoulders, the Duchess leant, at a perilous angle, out into the raw March day gesticulating violently.

"Come in, come in at once," screamed Her Grace of Westmainham, "you naughty, bad child."

And in order to reinforce her command she stamped a Balmoral booted foot upon the floor.

"Come in, you'll catch your death of cold, and serve you right."

Then she turned and beckoned to Mrs. Kincaid.

"Come here," she cried, "just look at Lady Caroline—in the garden! What is she doing out there at this time of day? Will you be so good as to inform me?"

Thus agitatedly appealed to, and a little curious herself to see what was transpiring below, Mrs. Kincaid joined the Duchess and looked out of the window.

In the garden underneath, a little round-faced, cheerful-eyed, snub-nosed person in a tartan frock and strapped shoes, with neither a hat on her dark curls nor a jacket to protect her sturdy little form from the inclemency of the weather, was standing on the grass almost directly under the bedroom window of the infuriated Duchess. At the

moment she appeared to be engaged in hunting over the well-mowed grass, inch by inch—a lengthy process indeed—for some object which had up till then seemingly eluded her with complete success. And so absorbed was she in her task that, her back to the house, she wore the aspect of one deaf and blind to anything and everything but the matter in hand. Indeed, it almost looked as if the poor little creature suffered possibly from some slight affection of the ear, for the Duchess's loud-voiced remonstrances were quite obviously not reaching her in spite of the fact that Her Grace was using, *con amore*, a pair of naturally fine lungs to their fullest extent. Utterly unmoved and tranquil the little lady most conscientiously continued her search, the while the air around became resonant with sound and clamour.

Finally the Duchess leant yet further out of the window. "Caroline," she shrieked in a last frenzied effort, "answer me at once. Do you want the whole of London to hear me calling to you? Answer me at once, or I'll come down and whip you myself. Where are the nurses? And what in the name of goodness do they imagine they are paid for? How dare you go out in your thin house shoes?"

The dire threat of personally administering condign chastisement, if not the avalanche of words poured out by the Duchess, must have weighed to a certain extent with the small creature below; for, quite suddenly, she straightened herself and turned to the house albeit unwillingly enough.

"I am hunting for something, Mama," she explained in a delightfully clear and childish treble.

The Duchess gasped and so did Mrs. Kincaid in the background, but each for different reasons.

"That I can see for myself," she retorted. "Do you take me for a fool, Caroline?"

How gratifying it is to have to record that the child thus unexpectedly presented by her parent with a problem that was indubitably one of the most delicate in the world did

not lose an atom of composure; nor did she to her honour, be it remarked, hesitate for one second in her answer. With a cheerful promptitude and certainty that did her powers of perception the greatest credit she made reply:

"No, Mama," and her childish voice rang out over the garden.

"I am very glad of that," returned the Duchess drily, "very glad of that."

But the winged shaft of sarcasm sped harmlessly as far as Mrs. Kincaid could observe, over the head of the Lady Caroline, her attitude of polite and patient attention merely indicating that having been asked a question she had in duty bound answered it to the best of her ability; with the effect, or result, of her reply she had no concern whatever. She assumed in short, no kind of responsibility. She therefore continued to look up to her mother with an expression of gentle enquiry on her small face that had the unfortunate consequence of further enraging the Duchess almost to the point of suffocation. Determined however not to be worsted in a mere verbal encounter by so small an opponent, once more she led her forces to the attack. "Now, perhaps," she resumed, with crushing irony, "having admitted that I possess my wits still—for which I thank you, Caroline——"

"Not at all, Mama," thus blandly her young daughter.

"Don't interrupt—now, perhaps, you will be good enough to tell me what you are doing down there. I quite understand that you wish it to be supposed that you are searching for something—valuable."

The Duchess's scorn was extreme.

"That, if I may say so jumps to the eye. But what is it? and why are *you* there? Do I keep no nurses?" she ended in telling accents of Junolike wrath.

But, completely unmoved, Lady Caroline stood her ground and proceeded with the utmost placidity to embark on a fuller explanation for the benefit of her unenlightened parent.

"It is Amelia's new doll, Mama," she began. "It"—Lady Caroline hesitated for the fraction of a second, choosing her next words with noticeable deliberation—"it got—thrown—out of the nursery window—by mistake."

"How came the window to be opened?" demanded the Duchess.

But embarked on her recital Lady Caroline was evidently not dealing with side issues. She continued, therefore, brushing aside as irrelevant her mother's demand:

"It—got thrown out—and I am to go to bed directly after tea, and not see the new governess if I can't find it and return it to Amelia, Nurse Cross says."

"And a good thing, too," said the Duchess.

"And it is such a very small policeman to make such a fuss about," finished Lady Caroline with a heartfelt sigh.

"Size has nothing to do with it," retorted her mother.

Now the explanation had been delivered by Lady Caroline in the impersonal manner of one who will take no responsibility for the acts of an official for whom there is not any real sympathy but for whom there is felt a long standing sense, if hidden, of grievance; and grievance which would almost appear at times to assume the proportions of a feud. So Mrs. Kincaid was not surprised to hear the Duchess comment somewhat severely on her daughter's rebellious attitude towards those high authorities who reigned in the nursery. But very little of her eloquent and no doubt deserved strictures reached the ear of her daughter; for just as her mother was getting well into her stride, if one might so express it, the child made first a dart forward and then a pounce at a longish, stiffish looking object, which rested precariously enough in a leafless bush close by, and holding up in triumph the missing officer of the law, exclaimed, as she swung him carelessly in the air by his left leg:

"Hurrah, I've found it!"

He was, as she had earlier complained, an extremely unimportant looking specimen.

"Fancy fussing about him," she cried, and she tossed him in the air, "but now I've found him—so I needn't go to bed." And without further ado, and leaving the Duchess in the middle of one of her most majestic periods, she darted with lightning speed into the house and was seen no more.

The Duchess exchanged looks with her maid—eloquent looks. Then she shrugged her shoulders and shut the window.

"I'm not so sure about not going to bed," she mused. "Except that she'd spend the entire evening pillow-fighting with Charlotte and probably cover the floor with feathers, I should be inclined to send her there this minute."

She moved over to the fireplace as she spoke and began to warm her hands at the blaze, one foot upon the fender; whilst Mrs. Kincaid resumed her duties noiselessly.

"It will mean another attack of croup for Caroline," she continued, "you see if it doesn't, Kincaid. What can Nurse Cross be thinking of to let the child out in such weather?"

But Mrs. Kincaid, thus appealed to, also professed herself quite at a loss to comprehend the mental processes of the head of the nursery; and with an impatient sigh the Duchess let the subject drop.

"Yes," she nodded in response to her maid's suggestion that time was getting on and it would be better for her to start out as soon as might be if she wished to get through that afternoon's engagements, "yes, I'll put on my bonnet now."

And then a startling idea appeared to occur to her with amazing force. "Kincaid," she cried, "my brain must be going; didn't Caroline say something about a new governess?"

Mrs. Kincaid assented.

"There," cried the Duchess, "I knew there was something on my mind. Was it today she was to come? I am sure I don't envy the poor soul; three pupils as tiresome as Caroline, Charlotte, and George would be hard to find."

Her head now running on this notion she waved Mrs. Kincaid and her bonnet peremptorily away together.

"Wait," she commanded, "I must look this up, before I go out. Now what was the young woman's name?"

Mrs. Kincaid, her eye on the fast moving hands of the clock, pondered. Somewhere recently she'd heard the name mentioned. She began to revolve the matter in her mind. "I believe it was Horsey, Your Grace," she said after some moments devoted to swift and intensive thought. But the Duchess was not attending to her at all. With knitted brow she had crossed to her writing table and was now in the midst of a wholesale ransacking of the contents of its drawers. Already, to Mrs. Kincaid's dismay, chaos was succeeding order within them. At first with all her efforts, Her Grace produced nothing more germane to the matter than a pile of bills, paid and unpaid, a child's sock, a broken fan, a coral necklace, and a large bundle of unanswered letters. These last she regarded with open dismay.

"What a life," sighed the Duchess. "How I hate answering letters; I do believe I shall have to get someone to do them for me." Then she picked up the coral necklace. "How on earth did Amelia's beads get here?" she cried.

Then before Mrs. Kincaid could offer any suggestion she made a dart very much as her little daughter had done earlier. "Here it is," she cried. "I can always find things—if only people wouldn't tidy me up." And she fairly waved the letter at Mrs. Kincaid before she fell to reading it.

"Horsey, that's the name. The girl comes straight from the boarding school in Kent. So she can't have a sweetheart, eh, Kincaid? We shall have no nonsense of that kind to contend with, let us hope."

Again she referred to the epistle in her hand.

"She's highly recommended by Mr. Francis, himself. He does not seem to consider her a beauty, but that's no drawback in a governess."

And the Duchess turned the page. "She's about Vic-

toria's age and an orphan—poor child," continued the kind-hearted Duchess. "It's hard to have to fare forth into this harsh world so early. Kincaid, you might tell Hortense from me to give her an eye. And make her at home and comfortable. But I hope to goodness, though, she'll be equal to keeping Caroline and Charlotte in order. It's more than anyone else has been able to do up to the present."

"Except his late Grace," ventured Mrs. Kincaid after consideration.

The Duchess laughed. "Ah, well," said she, and she threw the letter down again on to her writing table.

"You may give me my bonnet now," she finished and returned to the dressing table once more, whither her maid followed her with her head gear. A moment or two elapsed in businesslike silence whilst the Duchess donned her bonnet and secured it to her abundant hair with a couple of jet-headed pins. But her cogitations were evidently still concentrated on her offspring and their misdoings.

"I must impress on poor Miss Horsey," she remarked, "the necessity of keeping Caroline's and Charlotte's pug noses to the scholastic grindstone."

This point of view, however, was not greeted with enthusiasm by Mrs. Kincaid. Indeed, to put it very mildly she looked extremely dubious. For knowing the magnitude of the task under discussion she considered it to be much beyond the power of any ordinary female, let alone a young and presumably inexperienced girl. She therefore judged it wiser to offer no opinion on the subject and the Duchess continued her remarks.

"They're simply little savages. When I think of the Princess Royal speaking French fluently at three years of age; and my fat Amelia still preoccupied with the learning of such easy nonsense as—the cat is on the mat—and—'Who cares?' as she very justly asked only the other day. Well, I begin to think my children must be excessively stupid."

Mrs. Kincaid admitted that at first sight this might be so; and the Duchess went on, now thoroughly warmed up to her subject:

"As for Caroline and Charlotte not even knowing the date of the Battle of Waterloo—although I myself took them to the old Duke's funeral only three years ago—it's abominable. I declare sometimes I wish they'd all been drowned at birth like kittens."

This singularly unmaternal sentiment moved Mrs. Kincaid to utter a brief protest, although a moment's reflection caused her to realize that the Duchess had made the remark more from a dialectical desire to finish her speech on a dramatic climax than anything else.

"I'm sure Your Grace is very fond of them," said Mrs. Kincaid, "and the house wouldn't be the same without them."

"There," cried the Duchess with immense feeling, "you're right; it wouldn't."

She finished pinning back the broad violet satin strings of her bonnet with deft fingers and sighed again deeply. "Why couldn't I have had ordinary children like anyone else?" she demanded. "But they are all odd—everyone of 'em. Heaven knows it's a difficult position at the best of times to be left a widow with a young family—but——"

She raised expressive eyes to heaven. "Well, well," she continued, "it was just like Frederick to retire from the parental business when he might have been of some use in bringing up his children."

Again she fell silent and seemed to commune with herself, and again after a moment she gave voice to the same idea which had occurred to her earlier.

"I like my liberty, now I've got it, as well as the next woman—I don't really *want* another husband. But I don't believe I'm strong-minded enough to cope with these little wretches single-handed. Why even Amelia defies me, and she's only four—and fat at that."

Again, Mrs. Kincaid made no comment on these musings.

For years she had been aware of her mistress's curiously detached point of view with regard to her children. And to a very large extent she had a good deal of sympathy for it. All through her married life Mrs. Kincaid had been most shrewdly aware of the impersonal way in which his handsome wife had regarded the late Duke. A thousand small omissions of the usual proofs of conjugal interest and affection had shown time and again which way the wind blew only too clearly. And the observant Scotch woman had put it down in her own mind to the fact that the ducal marriage had turned out a great disappointment to the Duchess almost from its inception. Herself impulsive and affectionate, her husband's cold narrowness of mind had sorely wounded and then finally slain all respect and sympathy she might have felt for him in the first instance. The whole affair had proved in many ways mistaken. Added to which, the Duchess Adelaide, having been brought up with wider views, and more, as she often expressed it, "international ideals," in time learnt to live a mental life completely apart from the partner of her joys and sorrows; and made for herself a daily round of duties and pleasures in which her husband took not the smallest part. Not that he was at all aware of her shifted interests. He was of much too self-complacent a nature to notice any woman's moods as long as they did not actually disturb him. In consequence, as the years went by and his children were born, to the world they presented the appearance of decent, marital felicity, but it was quite patent to Mrs. Kincaid that, at times, weary of her shackles, the Duchess regarded her position as irksome and her children as something of a bore. Nor did this point of view seem so terribly unnatural to one who had watched the Duchess grow from a high-spirited young woman, interested in everything and friendly to the whole world, as it were, into the model wife she was expected to be—not without tears in the process neither.

But true to her race and her training, Mrs. Kincaid was

ot going to admit for an instant that her mistress, to whom he was deeply devoted, could be lacking in either affection or duty where her children were concerned. And so in order to turn the conversation into less dangerous channels she remarked that Lady Amelia if she did not, like Her Majesty's eldest daughter, shine at learning how to read her Primer, and was not too quick at acquiring foreign tongues, yet was one of those sunshiny lumps of fat and kittenlike mischief who invariably knew so well what they wanted that in consequence more often than not in later life they overpassed the most brilliant ones of all. And that there wasn't a soul in the house who did not adore the bairn. Then she deemed it time to tender the Duchess her muff and gloves as a gentle reminder that she still intended driving out that afternoon.

"But it's not always good for Amelia to get her own way," retorted Her Grace, "I feel I ought to be much stricter. And I must confess, Kincaid, that I could wish children would not grow up so quickly."

In which sentiment Mrs. Kincaid also agreed.

"But it's a way they have, Your Grace," she said.

"Why, it only seems yesterday," continued the Duchess, "that I went to Her Majesty's coronation, and sat all day in that draughty, dusty Abbey, with my coronet on my lap, and a wind fit to kill an ox whistling round my bare shoulders: and I was not much older than the Queen herself—then— And now there's Victoria setting herself up and behaving like a noodle."

"Tut, tut," said Mrs. Kincaid.

"When you know as well as I do the Marquis of Lassington is the best match in England—going at the moment. And Victoria isn't everybody's money. She'd drive me demented in a week," remarked her mother with an outspokenness which was decidedly unflattering to that young lady, as she turned to the looking glass for a final inspection of her countenance; and finding a spot as yet unprovided with its load of cornstarch dabbed a hasty puff on to it

before she pulled down her veil and prepared to get into the coat Mrs. Kincaid was holding.

"Then, there's Frederick," she continued, one arm in that fur garment, "he's making a perfect nuisance of himself at Eton. He's been swished again this term."

"Whatever for?" asked Mrs. Kincaid, as she gently insinuated the left arm of her mistress into the coat sleeve.

"I'm sure I don't know," cried the Duchess impatiently. "But he's only fourteen, and I can't and won't have him home if he does happen to get more swishings than they allow to each boy. It seems a miserly policy; and so I told the Head the other day. He really must make an exception in Fred's case and enlarge his borders—as far as swishing is concerned. I told him it wouldn't hurt the boy; he's as tough as a rhinoceros."

At this point in the Duchess's fulminations Mrs. Kincaid permitted herself the luxury of a hearty laugh. From the hour of his birth she had always kept a particularly soft spot in her heart for the prankish and high-spirited heir to the Dukedom, so like his mother as he was in disposition as well as looks. And now that he was by his father's untimely decease the reigning monarch, in her quiet, unobtrusive way, Mrs. Kincaid exercised a very excellent influence on his boyish mind. To her he confided most of his joys and sorrows. And his exploits as a wet bob were all related, in great style, to her sympathetic ear. As also were most of his escapades. To her he was and would ever be her "bonny lad"; and to her he came pell-mell with all his troubles, his difficulties, and his problems. Curiously enough, although his mother was quite aware of the deep affection existing between her eldest son and Mrs. Kincaid, she had never evinced the slightest jealousy of it. In some ways the Duchess was a great-souled woman and never more so than when she decided not to spoil or destroy the faithful affection her maid had for the young Duke and he for her. Far from it, in many ways the Duchess had from time to time taken pains to show Mrs. Kincaid that she

very much valued the influence she exerted on her son. An influence she knew so well to be as disinterested as it was honest.

"Ah, weel," said Mrs. Kincaid, "boys will be boys. It's a pity these schoolmasters expect them to be little old men."

The Duchess nodded. "You might give your bonny lad a talking to all the same, Janet," she remarked. "He minds you——"

"Whiles——" countered Mrs. Kincaid and added with apparent irrelevance, "The puir lamb."

"Ah, only wait till he's a few years older, and falls in love with a barmaid——"

"The Lord forbid," ejaculated Mrs. Kincaid.

"You'll have a nice to-do with him then. For I shall turn him over to you—it will be a terrible time—I can feel it in my bones. And very probably she'll have red hair, too," cried the Duchess mischievously, busily pulling on her gloves.

Mrs. Kincaid, as the Duchess anticipated in launching her bolt, was duly horrified at the destiny sketched out for her lamb; and she was just about to reply at some length, with Scottish and eloquent piety, when an unexpected knock at the door interrupted her.

"Now what can that be?" asked the Duchess, then as a second knock was heard, "Come in, come in," she cried, "whoever you are. I am late enough, as it is."

Thus brusquely admonished, if hardly encouraged, the hand that had ventured to knock opened the door slowly a few inches, and a little girl looked round the corner very dubiously. Mrs. Kincaid standing between her mistress and the newcomer glanced at her and shook her head reproachfully.

"It's Lady Charlotte," she said.

The Duchess turned abruptly.

"Now what do you want?" she demanded. "Come inside, Charlotte; and don't stand on that mat, like a stork on one leg."

Thus addressed the child came into the room closing the door behind her. She was about eight or nine years old; and bore a striking resemblance to the little maiden in the garden, to whom she was, in point of fact, the twin. She was dressed in the same kind of tartan frock, and wore strap shoes and white stockings. But her hair, unlike Lady Caroline's which was inclined to curl and which was kept from falling into her eyes by a round comb of tortoise-shell, was done in two short and thick pig-tails ornamented at their ends with a large tartan bow. She also wore a black alpaca apron, decorated with little pockets and frilled, in order to preserve as far as might be her frock from the daily vicissitudes of a schoolroom career. And into these apron pockets she had thrust her hands as deeply as possible. Discomfited for the moment by her mother's chilly reception she remained near the door, hesitatingly. "Well, what is it, Charlotte?" demanded the Duchess. "For goodness sake don't stand there staring at me like a stuffed pig."

Thus again so uncompromisingly admonished, the child, with a look of appeal at her parent (which fell on absolutely stony ground—for the Duchess although she saw it took not the slightest notice of it) decided to proceed with her errand; whatever it might be. Therefore, with a marked shrug of her small shoulders, she walked sedately enough across the room. But about two feet away from the Duchess she came to a sudden halt.

An abrupt stoppage of which Mrs. Kincaid perfectly realized the significance. To her that strategic two feet of distance was easily explainable. For the Duchess, like the famous Bess of Hardwicke and still more famous Elizabeth Tudor, had a trick of boxing ears first, on general principles, when put out—and enquiring into the justice of the action afterwards. And as the Lady Charlotte had suffered from this habit of her parent's more than once, as she considered, too impetuously, she was taking no chances today; when the air looked murky to her from the word "Go."

Just out of reach she stood her ground, her line of retreat already marked out, and met her mother's disapproving glance with stolid indifference. She had come to say something; and that something she was going to say before she left the room.

"Take your hands out of your apron pockets," ordered the Duchess irritably. "How often have I told you that no well-bred young lady either whistles, or puts her hands in her pockets?"

Across Lady Charlotte's features flitted an expression of extreme puzzlement.

"But I wasn't whistling, Mama," she objected.

She made, however, no effort that Mrs. Kincaid could see to remove her hands from their places of concealment, obviously trusting to luck that her mother having issued the order would not bother to see it carried out; the more so as she was busy buttoning up her glove.

"Did I say you were whistling?" retorted the Duchess, struggling with a refractory button, and falling into the trap set for her by her small daughter; and in so doing entirely forgetting the original cause of complaint.

"You mentioned whistling, Mama," Lady Charlotte pointed out.

"Nonsense—stuff and fudge," ejaculated Her Grace, employing that curiously lightninglike change of front with which Lady Charlotte always found herself utterly at a loss to cope in the grown-ups of her small world. Never under any circumstances had she been able to follow these sudden changes which resulted in such extraordinary transformations of a subject-matter. It was to her a kind of daily miracle which always left her gasping and entirely incoherent.

"Now what is it?" repeated her mother. "I can't keep the carriage waiting any longer; the horses will have had time, ample time, to catch terrible colds as it is."

Warned by her tone that if she wanted to speak she must speak now or, as the marriage service puts it, she must for-

ever hold her peace, Lady Charlotte drew a quick breath—something between a gasp and a sigh—and plunged into the heart of her subject.

"Can Caroline and me—no I—I mean us—can we stay up later tonight, please?"

"And why?" asked the Duchess coldly.

Evidently Lady Charlotte had not been prepared for so frosty a reception to her anxious request. And there was a pause in which she ventured no explanation, merely shifting her weight from one foot to another, whilst she considered the question.

"Why?" repeated her mother. "I see no reason. Little girls like you and Caroline should be in bed by seven every night. Otherwise how can you expect to grow?"

But this point of view Lady Charlotte evidently saw no reason to take into account.

"I don't mind about growing," returned the child earnestly.

"Humph," snorted the Duchess, "you wouldn't."

"And surely," continued Lady Charlotte shrewdly, "one night, Mama, would not make such a difference."

"You never can tell which night you're going to grow," the Duchess pointed out.

"I grew a whole inch last year; and I daresay it wouldn't matter if I skipped a little bit of growing this year."

But the Duchess was uncompromisingly determined to admit no argument along these lines.

"Stuff and fudge," again she cried. "Nonsense." Then she added as an afterthought, as she drew on to her left hand a faultlessly fitting glove, "why on earth do you want to stay up? This new governess again? She will see much too much of you, only too soon."

Lady Charlotte shook her head.

"It's not the new governess, Mama," she explained. "I thought you would guess why——"

"Am I a thought reader?" interrupted the Duchess plaintively.

"Frederick is coming home this afternoon," announced Lady Charlotte.

"No!" cried the Duchess.

And she sat down heavily on the nearest chair.

"Yes," said the Lady Charlotte firmly.

"Lord!" said her mother. And there was a moment's blank silence; then turning to Mrs. Kincaid in open dismay, the Duchess cried:

"I'd clean forgotten it. Victoria and her absurd goings-on put it out of my head. I suppose it's the middle of the term or something."

"Long leave," said Lady Charlotte succinctly.

"I wish it was at the deuce," returned her mother. "I recollect now receiving a scrawl from Frederick on the subject—but the spelling was so bad I was more taken up with that than with what he was supposed to be telling me. How he ever came to be Captain of the Lower Boys I can't think; some mistake somewhere. I know he'll fail in his Trials, or whatever they call 'em; you see if he doesn't. Well, well, Kincaid, I can't possibly wait any longer now. I haven't the slightest idea what time he's arriving, and I've got to get that ring back; and there's the Foreign Office reception this evening, and a soirée at the French Embassy. Settle all about his room like a good soul——"

Mrs. Kincaid nodded.

"Very good, Your Grace," she answered.

"And his sheets being aired—and his dinner—— He can have a chocolate pudding if he wishes. And be so good as to inform him that I consider a great boy of fourteen ought to spell better——"

She stopped, deliberated for a moment, and then added, "And I'll see him tomorrow."

Having issued these commands the Duchess rose from the chair into which she had subsided, picked up her muff, shook her skirts, and, having, it seemed, completely lost sight of Lady Charlotte's original demand, declared herself ready to proceed forth; and looking rather like a ship in

full sail was about to sweep from the room when the child, dismayed by being thus passed over, ran up to her—catching at the wide sleeve of her mother's coat as she did so.

"Mama, mama," she cried insistently, "can't we stay up later, Caroline and me? George wants to as well—but he doesn't matter, he's only six."

The Duchess looked down at the eager face upturned to her.

"Oh, bother," she cried, "I suppose so. That is—if your new governess doesn't object."

And detaching the child's fingers from her coat, she resumed her majestic progress from the room. Out on to the landing she steadily stepped, without so much as a backward glance. Lady Charlotte watched her going and her face fell. The brusque movement and the indifferent answer to her request had hurt her feelings. For this child secretly cherished a real and admiring affection for her magnificent mother. To her the infrequent occasions on which the Duchess sent for her and took her out driving dressed up in her very best clothes and sitting beside her as mum as a mouse were red-letter days indeed. Tremendous occasions past anything the Duchess ever imagined. The stolen half hour's too, which, curled up in a chair, she was negligently permitted to spend in her mother's bedroom watching her get ready for a party were such highly prized rewards for meritorious conduct that they were the chief incentive with Lady Charlotte in making her pay a worried attention to her lessons—far oftener than she otherwise would have done. That she knew whole pages of Magnall's "Questions and Answers" by heart was directly attributable to her determination not to lose her privileges because of any shortcomings on her part that she could avoid. For unlike her sister Caroline, whose indifference to their surviving parent was so tremendous as to be almost awe-inspiring, at times Lady Charlotte could and did feel in a dumb way that she was unaccountably bereft of some kind of comfortable affection in her home which other children seemed

to enjoy, even if they did not consciously appreciate it. Therefore the door had hardly closed on the Duchess before she swung round, her eyes full of tears, to Mrs. Kincaid.

"That's too bad of Mama," she cried, stung to defiance, "she knows very well the new governess will say 'No.' I expect she will be just the same as old Miss Reynolds was. A nasty sneak of an old cat. I hate all governesses; they are pigs."

Mrs. Kincaid looked up from folding away an Indian shawl the Duchess had a particular fondness for wearing (it had been a Royal gift) and shook her head most disapprovingly. "Lady Caroline," she returned sharply, "such language is not becoming in one of your station. Besides it was a very stupid time to choose to come and bother your Mama. She was late as it was and she had a great deal to worry her. Also you'll have plenty of time to see your brother tomorrow. I'll warrant you'll all be in mischief long before the day is out."

To this accusation Lady Charlotte merely responded with an appreciative giggle as she climbed up into a high old-fashioned armchair. Her brief outbursts of ill-humour were soon over and as soon forgotten by her.

"I hate my station," she observed cheerfully after a moment's reflection.

Mrs. Kincaid stared at her as one who could hardly believe her ears. "You hate your station?" she repeated blankly.

"Yes," returned the Lady Charlotte in a most uncompromising manner. "There seem to be such a lot of things that are not becoming."

"Oh," said Mrs. Kincaid.

"Besides, I thought stations had only to do with trains and engines and going away," added the child in a vague puzzle.

"There are stations and stations," returned the lady's maid sapiently.

"Oh, well, it's all very confusing," sighed Lady Charlotte.

"It won't be when you're older," said Mrs. Kincaid, crossing to the dressing-table.

Then she asked most unexpectedly:

"Why didn't you take your hands out of your pockets when Her Grace desired you to?"

Lady Charlotte looked extremely uncomfortable on hearing this question; this reviving of a dead subject was more than she had bargained for. And for a moment she was half minded to make a bolt for it. But realizing that her present interlocutor bore no very great powers of severe punishment about with her, she took heart of grace and decided to see the matter out. So, with her right leg loosely doubled up under her, she continued to sit in the chair the while she regarded her questioner with an indescribable expression of humour and cunning.

"Ah," said the Lady Charlotte at last.

"Well?" demanded Mrs. Kincaid; and her tone, brisk and uncompromising, indicated that in her opinion the simple ejaculation "Ah" was no reply at all; and that she expected, nay, intended to receive immediately a less cryptic answer, or there would be trouble in the House of Westmainham.

All this Lady Charlotte understood very well from her tone. And for a moment the child remained silent weighing what she would say; till with a chuckle of mischief and amusement she scrambled down from the chair and remarked, "Wouldn't you like to know, Kinny?"

"I mean to know," returned Mrs. Kincaid serenely.

Forthwith Lady Charlotte handed the palm of victory to Mrs. Kincaid. "Oh, very well," said she, and running up to the dressing-table she leant against it watching with much interest Mrs. Kincaid's deft reduction of the Duchess's chaos into order upon it.

"Well?" asked Mrs. Kincaid once more, her hands busy amongst the innumerable furnishings of her mistress's toilette but her eyes on Lady Charlotte.

Suddenly, with a quick movement, the little girl withdrew

her hands from their places of concealment and, as rapidly, flourished them in Mrs. Kincaid's face.

"I didn't take them out of my pockets," she announced in shrill tones, "because they're all over ink. Look!"

Even to Mrs. Kincaid this appeared as a good and sufficient reason; she permitted herself one glance of stony horror. The facts were as stated. Lady Charlotte's fingers, up to her second knuckle, were as blue as the skin of any early Briton could ever have been.

With Mrs. Kincaid to think was to act. "How very naughty, my lady," was her grim comment. And catching the small, triumphant, gesticulating digits, before they could again be decently concealed, she marched their owner over to the washstand. Nor did she let Lady Charlotte go until her hands were red with the scrubbing they had received, but otherwise wondrously clean.

During this summary laving process, Lady Charlotte assumed an air of weary indifference and shrugged her shoulders while Mrs. Kincaid held forth with some natural heat on the enormity of her conduct. Such ill-bred, slipshod ways she could not understand. Such extreme carelessness was more than deplorable. What would the new governess think of her new pupil?

"I can't help it," protested Lady Charlotte, "all my pens leak. Caroline and I have often wondered why people must make leaky pens. If they only knew what trouble they got innocent children into," she added, with a touch of pathos.

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Kincaid, "carelessness, that's what it is, carelessness. There's nothing wrong with the pens; you fill them too full."

Lady Charlotte considered the point and then combatted it actively. "That's all you know about it," she returned, as Mrs. Kincaid dried her hands with efficient severity. "I promise you it's not me."

"A bad workman quarrels with his tools."

But even to this apt quotation of an old adage, Lady Charlotte remained in a state of vigorous disagreement.

"No, it's the pens; really it is, Kinny, dear. They do it on purpose, I think."

"Absurd," retorted Mrs. Kincaid firmly.

Then she added:

"Now, your hands are as they should be, but how long will they remain clean?"

This problem was, however, far too severe for Lady Charlotte. "Now, Kinny, that's too hard a question," she cried in disgust as she ran back to her old position against the table and watched Mrs. Kincaid once more sort out ribbons and *fal de lals* of all kinds and lay them away in their proper resting places. Deliberately and leisurely she moved about whilst in the darkening room she hung up dresses, shook out scarves, and folded bodices. Then in order to continue her work she lit the great brass candlesticks on the table, and on the mantelpiece; always watched by Lady Charlotte whose powers of conversation seemed for the moment to have deserted her. At last a thought struck Mrs. Kincaid and she paused, match in hand, before she threw it into the fire.

"Where's Lady Victoria this afternoon?" she asked.

Lady Charlotte, immersed in sombre reflection of her own, glanced up surprised at the sharpness of the question.

"Torie?" she replied, "I don't know. At least not after she had her music lesson. But she was in one of her tempers and she said she wished she'd been born a crossing sweeper—and she knew she was going to play abominably, too."

This piece of information Mrs. Kincaid received with unconcern. "Indeed," said she indifferently.

"And when Torie plays abominably it's like little ponies trotting over the keys, you know."

Mrs. Kincaid threw away the match and went over to the windows to draw down the blinds.

"She does thump when she's cross," continued Lady Charlotte pensively. "Would you consider Torie musical?"

Mrs. Kincaid weighed the question for a moment, and then decided in the negative.

"No, I should not," she said; and she drew the curtains with a decision which shook them a little on their rings.

And again a silence ensued until Lady Charlotte broke it by announcing that for her part she would never wish to be a crossing sweeper, even if her eldest sister nourished such unconventional ambitions.

"The sweeper at the crossing into the Park looks so blue," she explained, "although he wears three waistcoats. And he has such dreadful red mittens. Sir John Marlow likes him, though," she added in rather surprised accents; "what do you think he sees in him?"

Mrs. Kincaid found herself unable to answer Lady Charlotte's question. She had no idea why Sir John should profess a liking for the crossing sweeper.

"And I worked him those mittens," she added, "better have red mittens than red hands. And I think you must be mistaken; why should Sir John either like or dislike him—although he is a most respectable, poor soul."

"Torie said she liked him."

"That would be no reason," returned Mrs. Kincaid.

"Wouldn't it?" asked Charlotte. "Well, they both give him pennies pretty often, anyway; perhaps that's it, and he wishes them luck and a happy marriage."

Mrs. Kincaid frowned on hearing this.

"He should learn to mind his own business," said she.

"He's too old," returned Lady Charlotte promptly. "But does he mean Doodles, or does he mean Sir John?"

Luckily for Mrs. Kincaid she was spared having to reply to this exceedingly awkward question; for without warning the door now opened again to admit the Lady Caroline, who, flinging herself upon her twin, announced in a loud and breathless manner that she had been hunting for hours all over the silly old house for her sister, and were they to go to bed at the usual time, or were they to stay up?

Lady Charlotte regarded the newcomer with hauteur. "Don't maul me, Caroline," she remarked coldly, "it all depends on our new governess."

CHAPTER IV

TELLS OF THE FATE OF A HACKNEY CARRIAGE AND WHAT CAME OF IT

SEATED at length in the dim recesses of the hackney coach to which she had been most formally conducted by Mr. Francis' head clerk—that tall and melancholy being who was popularly credited with knowing more about the secrets of the celebrated firm's clients than even the firm, collectively, did itself—Matilda, refusing to be intimidated by his mournful and repressed manner as of one to whom all is indeed, without exception, mere dust and ashes, insisted—a little to his discomfiture—on shaking him warmly by the hand before he finally took his decorous leave and closed the cab door on her and her belongings.

Gaunt Mr. Wicks, a romantic at heart if ever there was one, received Matilda's thrust-out arm as though he were being endowed with something almost startlingly precious.

His bow was deep.

Then having shaken the little hand with more reverence than the occasion in itself seemed to justify, he returned it as punctiliously to her again.

His attitude of surprised homage, however, was quite lost on Matilda.

"Good-bye," she smiled, "and, please, wish me luck."

"Oh, I do—I do, indeed," warmly returned Mr. Wicks. After which almost wistful benison he closed the door of the vehicle and stood back on the pavement; whilst Matilda, in order to leave no duty as she conceived it undone, leant out of the window and waved him the friendliest of adieux with the utmost vigour as she set out on the final stage of her journey.

Once round the corner she drew her head in and re-seated herself on the shabby cushions of the old shandrydan. Upright, her little carpet-bag on the seat before her, her tin trunk rattling perilously on the very edge of the roof above her, her elastic-sided boots dangling in the musty straw with which the floor of the ramshackle vehicle was covered, she sat, surveying with bright eyes the strange and unaccustomed scene.

The cabman, now that the dignified and almost cloistered seclusion of Bedford Row was left behind, decided to take a more active part in the management of his affairs; and first started whistling to hasten his elderly quadruped. This not having any effect, he next proceeded to encourage him with a series of odd, throaty sounds which made Matilda wonder if her Jehu could possibly be sickening for whooping cough. These curious noises, she decided after a moment, were, however, evidently designed to urge the jaded beast to travel at something slightly faster than the funeral pace which he seemed to prefer. But, on the whole, this hoarse chirruping met with but disappointing results: and the cab continued to proceed as though it were part of a procession to the cabman's increasing annoyance and Matilda's amusement.

At last, after several stormy bursts of conversation, on the part of the cabby, which in their turn proved equally unavailing, he decided to bring himself with great reluctance to touch his horse up extremely perfunctorily with a broken lashed whip. It was only after this final exertion that the sagacious beast decided to accelerate his pace slightly: and broke with the greatest determination into an ambling trot as the cab clattered through the precincts of Theobald's Road.

Matilda, from under her bonnet, continued to gaze out of the unwashed window as well as she could into a crowded, bustling, indifferent world.

A world packed full of hard-featured mortals going busily to and fro—walking or riding as their inclinations or purses

permitted—intent on their own affairs. And preoccupied with those cares that are always incidental to life in a great city. Matilda observed that most of these hurrying people were shrouded to the eyes from the inclement weather in great coats, or long checked ulsters, or, here and there, thick pea jackets.

Very few of her own sex seemed to be about, and those whose business called them from their homes looked very unfashionable, were more often than not elderly, and sometimes quite poorly clad.

Not one face in all the shifting groups exhibited a particularly happy expression under its dripping umbrella—for now the rain had come gustily on again. Most wore an aspect of dull care when they did not present, as Matilda rather regretfully decided, a foxiness of demeanour that was quite alarming when one came to think of it. To Matilda's country-bred eyes, after a while, the swiftly moving crowds began to divide naturally into rabbits—with all a rabbit's foolishness of expression—or animals of a more predatory and vulpine character. Here and there Matilda even fancied she could trace a likeness to a weasel; and, once, she caught a glimpse of a face just like a cod-fish. After this discovery, a little uneasy as to the length these fanciful flights might be carrying her, she decided that she must really cease to watch the passers-by and defer her judgment of the capital and its inhabitants to a more favourable occasion.

For, after all, it was very likely owing to the weather that everything and everybody wore such an aspect of almost sinister unreality.

They all might, she reflected, be much more pleasant looking when the sun shone: if shine it ever did in this grey city with its smoke-begrimed buildings.

"So," she mused, "I must try to be just to them. One must never judge hastily. And certainly today is a wretched affair. All the same, I wonder if I shall like London. It's not nearly as pretty as Canterbury."

By this time the cab had pursued its leisurely way past the dingy splendours of the British Museum into Oxford Street; and it was at this point in her peregrinations that Matilda ceased to look out of the window any more and fell to dreaming instead.

Half unconsciously she turned her thoughts from the unromantic present into the shadowy past; and started to search her memory as she had so often done before—alas, now unavailingly—for some incident, however tenuous, of her early childhood which might throw a light on the mystery of her birth and parentage. An enigma which, she had always keenly felt, seemed to shut her outside the pale of ordinary happy family life. Never, it would seem, could she hope to make one of a contented and busy home circle; never was she to enjoy a father's care or a mother's tenderness; for never had she been able to induce Mr. Francis to open his lips on the matter. To all her questions, no matter how or when she had asked them, he had opposed an impenetrable barrier of chill reserve.

Who and what her parents had been—she was not to know. That she was an orphan and had a guardian was all the information she had ever been vouchsafed. And that was slender enough material on which to erect any theory, however fanciful, Heaven knew. But—that she had not always lived at the Misses Nixons' Select Seminary for Young Ladies she was very well aware; for, although Matilda had never spoken of it to a soul, dimly she could recollect—a very small frightened person, with a heart all a-flutter—arriving at the Swallow's Nest on just such a gusty day as this was, oh, so many years ago! Arriving too after a weary journey in first a boat that tossed very much, and then a ride in a stagecoach that smelt to Matilda of straw and hair oil: an odious combination. Even after the lapse of over a dozen years, Matilda could at will recall that abominably stuffy compound of stale straw and potent grease which seemed to adhere to herself and everybody else in the coach so persistently.

She remembered, too, at the last, clinging almost frenziedly to a tall, silent man—Mr. Francis, she felt sure—a man who had given her barley sugar in large quantities all day to keep her quiet (the sure sign of a bachelor); and who now kissed her not ungently at parting.

Very well could she recall those first days of strangeness and dumb suffering in an alien land under the eyes of her four preceptresses; who so soon had subtly given her to understand that she was not quite like the other girls; and that she was there not as a parlour boarder but to be as soon as possible a pupil teacher. Extremely hard had she found it to recollect her manners and not answer back when the very housemaids treated her from the first with a half-pitying contempt because she never received a present, or a letter, from the outside world. And then, as time went on, Matilda had got used to so much; and, incidentally, crept into the hearts of not a few inmates of that scholastic establishment on the Dover Road. And so, half unheeded, year after year had slipped by.

But where had she lived before that epoch-making day of travel over sea, and with whom?

Ghostlike fragments of disjointed and nebulous incidents and scenes passed, kaleidesopic, before her eagerly straining mental vision. Yet always the key to the riddle, hunt for it as she might, eluded her.

The first thing she could remember was a glowing fire guarded by a high and brightly burnished fender; herself on the knee of her nurse, she supposed. Matilda could call up each feature of the high-boned, harsh, peasant face with its brilliant black eyes topped off by a round cambric cap ornamented with two heavy gold pins.

Out of doors this familiar figure she recollected was further enveloped in a long circular grey merino cloak edged with a wide trimming of green velvet of a myrtle shade. And then her cap was still more beautiful with a quilling of dark green ribbon, the handsome ends of which fell to the

hem of her grey dress. A striking figure this—Matilda knew.

Then, she could, if she shut her eyes, still experience that curious sensation as of slipping off the rim of the world which so often seemed to have been her lot when her nurse's big apron was more starched than usual. That odd, almost terrifying, and yet completely exhilarating sense that in a moment she might be tobogganing into space. Suppose she ever did really start, what then? But Matilda remembered she never had; at the critical moment she had always been firmly grasped under the arms: and reseated in a less insecure position.

Outside the high barred windows of her nursery Matilda was conscious of a busy street; into which, sometimes held up in her nurse's arms she was allowed to look. An intoxicating amusement this. In the evening it was very full of lights and traffic. Sometimes a crowd ran down it shouting loudly and waving flags. And on one never to be forgotten day, a band at the head of a regiment of soldiers went marching along; on which thrilling occasion even her nurse opened the windows and shouted with the rest of the world. Sometimes Matilda fancied she could almost hear again the street cries, raucous often, shrill always; the cracking of the long whips and the endless clatter of carriages and carts over the cobble-stones below. That vision, clear and radiant, faded to give place to one of a large drawing-room all gilt chairs with cherry red seats, and high commodes painted with pastoral scenes, above which in great mirrors were reflected sometimes to Matilda's eager eyes lovely landscapes; or, at times, smiling men and women who held her up to see herself and them, teasingly asking her if she would not like to go and live in the "Land of Mirrors"? After which it appeared, in order that the game might proceed properly, that it was necessary for them to pretend to push her through the looking-glass to her very real though delicious alarm.

And here in this place of ordered beauty Matilda remembered the floors were very slippery—had she not seen men in blouses with brushes on their feet skating up and down their length to polish them: a wonderful sight—and on these floors were beautiful carpets with flowered borders on which her tiny footfall made not the slightest impression, so thick were they.

But here in this amazing and high-ceilinged place she was only allowed at moments of festival; and before she could be admitted to these halls, she remembered, she had to go through a very solemn process of investiture in her best sash and muslin frock, and her beloved red morocco shoes.

And, like little Karen in the fairy tale, she was always encouraged to dance on these occasions—to the sound of a gay melody played by some remote and shadowy being at a distant piano.

This shadowy being, too, she seemed to recollect had on one day of doom bade her make her curtsy to an utterly unknown but immensely tall and forbidding stranger.

Fragments of the scene came back faintly to Matilda.

Gazing down at her as from inaccessible heights the personage let his cold glance wander over her little restless figure. Finally he spoke.

“So this is the child: well, she doesn’t please me. Therefore we will dismiss the subject.”

Out of the confused past came the cold incisive tones—the harsh sentence. Which Matilda even then, young as she was, had resented she felt sure in her baby way. For from her earliest years she was the most feminine of beings: compact of impulse and emotion. Certainly she remembered she had in consequence utterly refused to take the polite leave of the repellent creature she was desired to by those in authority over her. For all she knew she had flung down with no uncertain hand the gage of battle as she declared, in tearful accents, that she hated *ce Monsieur*, and that he was decidedly *méchant, mais bien méchant*. A child of spirit one perceives.

In later days she had often idly wondered why she had not pleased this icily correct and alarming person. For she had to the best of her knowledge and belief never seen him before—nor, for that matter, after. And he could not have been cognizant of her childish misdeeds. Only those behind the scenes were aware that on one lamentable occasion of energetic disagreement she had bitten the son of the *concierge*, Madame Roussel. And curiously enough, this was the only name she could remember—Madame Roussel. But what she looked like, except that she was enormously stout, she had no more idea than the man in the moon. Finally there was a goat—an adored and friendly goat with a long beard—whose name she fancied had been Mustapha, though of this she was not certain. And this intelligent animal drew a little gaily painted victoria, in which she often rode. Sometimes on the box-seat, proudly grasping a pair of bright red reins decorated with silver bells that let loose a miniature carillon of pleasant sounds whenever she shook them—which was often—but more constantly she was lifted inside the little carriage and carefully wrapped in a fur rug, and so took her walks abroad.

She had loved her goat and had cried bitter tears at parting with it, she knew; her own *joli chèvre*.

But of all the blurred and, at this length of time, almost indistinguishable faces that moved about her in those far-off, happy days, one alone could she visualize—outside of her nurse—with any degree of distinctness.

And this was a young and pretty face with large dark eyes, that laughed always, framed in curling ringlets.

Yet when Matilda endeavoured to tax her memory yet further the knowledge she sought eluded her efforts entirely.

Truth to tell—what position this debonair and beautiful being had held to her she did not know: in fact had no inkling. Nor could she, try as she might, recall any name by which she had been taught to call her. But deep down in her heart Matilda was sure she had been used to regard this charming vision in some very special manner.

"I wonder if she could have been my mama," she mused, "and if so, I wonder if I am at all like her. Not that it really signifies; for if everyone is dead, except that funny old godfather of mine who never wishes to see me, I shall have to get on as best I can; no matter who I'm like. And then, perhaps, some day I may marry a curate. Only I do hope his name won't be Augustus. Or a country doctor—not that I should care about mixing up pills and things."

From these fragmentary and more or less disjointed reflections she now emerged into a region of purely speculative fancy; a domain that whilst equally unproductive of any tangible result was yet far more entertaining to Matilda. For here at least she could model events completely to her liking.

This "day dreaming," as Miss Sara Ann Nixon had so often scathingly dubbed it, was a favourite occupation of Matilda's in times of uncertainty and stress.

In this phantom world of her own creation she left far behind the disappointments and worries of a work-a-day existence and built up airy castles in the air to her exact wish. Castles, too, which she could demolish, or to which she could add, as the fancy took her.

So now, dismissing the past for the nonce, she leant back in the cab and began to erect a complete and gorgeous edifice—for the future; a building wherein she proceeded to order her life on a much more heroic scale. And in which she was, indeed, complete mistress of her fate.

High she raised her little head and her eyes shone like stars. She had already, to her entire satisfaction, bestowed her hand, if not her heart, amidst scenes of the most distracting fashion and elegance on a wealthy and splendid-looking spouse: who rarely thereafter troubled her with his presence except to hand her, bowing gracefully, into a variety of handsome equipages—each his gift—and wherein he encouraged her to proceed every night to the most glittering and sumptuous of balls and routs in order that her numerous and ravishing toilettes—provided by him at great cost—

might strike all beholders dumb with curious admiration; and he had, further, permitted her to visit the famous Wax-works of Madame Tussauds—for which Matilda cherished a secret passion especially for the Napoleonic relics and those lovely waxen babies in their cradles—whenever she so desired—which was pretty nearly daily: when, all of a sudden, in turning a corner there was an unexpected jar, an ominous grinding of the wheels, a lurching, a jerk, a crash—and Matilda found, to her great fright and consternation that she and her carpet-bag and the cab were all gently but firmly toppling over together. Whilst on the afternoon air in her immediate vicinity a loud chorus of shouts and objurgations arose.

Matilda's return from the land of make-believe was distressingly abrupt.

"Oh, my goodness!" she cried, "what is going to happen now?"

But there being no one near enough to catch her anxious enquiry, Matilda, naturally, received no answer to it.

A few seconds after, bruised and shaken, she found herself lying huddled in a corner of the cab on the famous carpet-bag; which she now, by a lucky chance, perceived had fortunately slipped under her in the general débâcle.

And ever nearer and more discordantly the chorus of voices outside resounded; added to an alarming and continuous crackling of broken glass. Whilst never had the rumble of the traffic, distant or close at hand, reverberated more menacingly in her ear.

Matilda, therefore, a prey to a variety of the most dismal of forebodings and unpleasant sensations—of which on the whole discomfort was perhaps the uppermost—lay back in her corner, not a little apprehensive as to what her fate might prove in the next few minutes.

And to her own great astonishment she found herself heartily wishing she had never left, in spite of its austere atmosphere, the safe asylum of her late boarding school.

"For I am not cut out for a city life," she murmured

mournfully. "And decidedly the rogue you know is better than the rogue you are not acquainted with."

She sighed heavily and added:

"And I was so pleased to come away, too: I suppose this is a judgment on me. But, indeed in this world you never do know what is going to happen."

And, so reflecting, Matilda closed her eyes and folding her little paws under her jacket composed herself to wait with what patience she might till it occurred to someone in the world outside that she undoubtedly needed rescuing from her present extremely irksome, not to say confined, position.

"I expect I've been overlooked in the excitement," she decided.

But in this she was, fortunately, mistaken.

For almost immediately, the jerking open of the cab door—now directly above her head—caused her to open her eyes: and, to her intense amazement she found herself gazing interestedly up into the face of a young man, who was, in his turn, regarding her with an expression of the liveliest concern upon his handsome features.

She blinked rapidly once or twice—but the vision seemed substantial enough.

Then for a second or two Matilda and he stared at each other in silence.

Finally,—“Are you very much hurt?” he said.

Matilda shook her head.

She did not on the whole, think that she had incurred much damage: either physical or mental. She was pretty certain none of her more important bones had suffered fracture of any kind, at any rate.

But before she could frame a suitable answer to his enquiry—on the lines that seriously hurt she was not although she felt exceedingly confused and dizzy and not a little bruised—he had energetically started to half lift, half pull her out of the forlorn and derelict vehicle in a praiseworthy endeavour to release her from her constrained posi-

tion as speedily as possible. But the task he had set himself was by no means an easy one. For to pull a female, however young and slim, duly panoplied in the then all pervading crinoline out of a growler lying on its side in the middle of Berkeley Square was not an undertaking lightly to be entered upon, by any means.

It was, to put it mildly, in the nature of a ticklish proceeding. Especially when, quite suddenly, the lady herself showed a tendency to become exceedingly limp with fright at the most critical moment in the whole delicate operation. Added to which, the young man was acutely conscious of there being a good deal too much broken glass strewn about the immediate neighbourhood, under foot, for it to be altogether pleasant or safe. Unless possibly one were an acrobat by profession.

But patience and cool determination, we are told with truth, will accomplish much.

And after a few tense moments, in which the bystanders watched the thrilling scene with critical interest, and during which Matilda's rescuer was endowed with a good deal of cheap if well-intentioned advice, that little lady found herself once more on a terra firma. Reticule and umbrella and all. And not so very much the worse for her singular experience, either.

Once on the pavement the first thing she did was to straighten her bonnet. Then she smoothed down her dress with quick pattings and shakings. And then, and not till then, did she look round the landscape, as it were.

A quite considerable crowd had gathered about her and the wreck of the equipage in which she had been travelling.

A cursory survey of the situation immediately showed her that the horse, too, was peacefully lying on its side in the road with, as far as she could discern, not the remotest intention of ever resuming an upright attitude again.

She hoped in this notion she might, of course, be mistaken.

At the same time, a regard for verity compelled her to admit that quite possibly this policy of masterly inaction on the part of the Bucephalus was partly due to the presence of a hatchet-faced, pale youth in a checked apron, who had, with a laudable desire to be helpful, seated himself most squarely and uncompromisingly on the unlucky beast's head.

For what reason Matilda, in her ignorance of city ways, could not quite determine: especially as he kept urging the languid quadruped to arise instantly—what time he emitted encouraging “Gerrups” and “Get alongs”—although he was himself making the business of rising a colossal, if not impossible, task.

Matilda contemplated this odd youth and his doings for a short while with great attention and gravity; and then decided that he showed very little common sense in his proceedings. At the same time she considered the cabman just as ridiculous in his handling of the crisis. For he, red-faced and apoplectic, and cursing loudly, aided by an obvious street loungee with a straw in his mouth, was engaged in divesting the recumbent creature of its harness in a very slow, not to say careless, manner. And was certainly making the whole thing appear much worse than need be. That he also bitterly regretted, as indeed, did Matilda, the necessity for taking this action he was most eloquently announcing to a not unamused world.

All this Matilda observed with great rapidity. Then her eyes wandered in search of her trunk. And with a sinking heart she sighted it. There, in the middle of the road, it lay where it had pitched—a most pathetic object—upside down in all its corded glory, forgotten. Matilda's gaze lingered on it sadly. Then she turned to her rescuer.

“And what am I to do now, please?” she enquired.

With characteristic tranquillity she completely ignored the presence of the crowd that surged about her attentively remarking her every movement.

The young man, thus appealed to, his arm still supporting her, glanced down at her very kindly.

"I am afraid you are much shaken," he returned, "it has been an alarming experience for you, madam."

"I feel giddy, certainly," conceded Matilda for her surroundings still evinced a marked tendency to go dizzily round and round with her; a most disturbing sensation.

"And," she added with firmness, after a moment, "I don't think I can go on in that cab."

Apparently there was another person of the same opinion. For here she was interrupted by the cabby himself who, for the moment, had abandoned his efforts at disentangling his elderly hunter from amongst the débris and had, unperceived by Matilda, sauntered up behind her. His voice at her elbow made her jump.

"I wouldn't take yer, missie; not if it was ever so," he announced impressively, breaking into the conversation with more emphasis than good-will.

Matilda, a little taken aback at this unlooked-for sortie on his part, made no reply, and he continued with ever increasing truculence:

"You've brought me and my old Ginger bad luck, missie, that's what you've done; I knew 'ow it would be the minute I seed yer coming."

This accusation Matilda felt was a trifle far-fetched.

"Oh, how could you?" she asked very sceptically.

"It's all along of your tin trunk on the roof," he explained. "I 'ates tin trunks on my roof—and so does Ginger. They allers makes me nervous as a kitten with their clattering: and then Ginger, poor hoss, takes his corners too short."

"Oh, does he?" said Matilda.

"And tin trunks, especially them tied up with cord, brings me ill-luck—same as white cats do."

"I am very sorry to hear that," politely returned Matilda, "particularly about the white cats. It's lucky I wasn't a white cat, wasn't it?"

"How do you know you're not?" murmured a voice at her side. "It's a pretty fairy tale—the one about the white cat."

"Yes," said Matilda, "but I prefer black cats myself. And—" she hesitated for she was a little confused at the unforeseen introduction of these absolutely irrelevant animals into the affair, "I couldn't be expected to know you disliked tin trunks, now could I?"

"I suppose not," admitted the cabby but in a very surly manner.

"And you could have mentioned it when you saw the box being brought out, couldn't you?"

To this also the cabby was obliged to assent, rather grudgingly.

"Then," said Matilda, carrying matters with a high hand, "I don't think you're very reasonable. But then I've always heard that superstitious people seldom are."

Without giving the now astonished cabman time to turn the tables on her—who felt rather as though a dove had unexpectedly flown at and pecked him severely—she turned again to the young man at her side.

"I suppose I ought to have another cab as soon as possible," she said. She looked round vaguely; but, as far as she could descry, there did not appear to be a single vehicle plying for hire within sight.

And dusk was beginning to creep, blue and misty, over the square. Fortunately, for the time being, the rain had ceased and the wind had fallen. Already the lamplighter, a comforter about his neck, was going his rounds.

"What am I to do?" again asked Matilda, a hint of tears not far off creeping into her voice. And she turned her back on the unfriendly cabman to cling childishly to the arm of her rescuer.

Looking into her wistful, upturned little face he smiled reassuringly.

"If I might suggest," he began in a wholly delightful,

rather boyish manner, "if I might suggest—suppose you permit me to assume command of the situation: I think I can grapple with it all right, you know."

This was comforting news indeed.

"I should be so gratified," murmured Matilda.

Again he smiled confidentially at her.

"Very well, then; that is settled. Pray allow me to have your luggage taken into my house here—" he indicated a stately building immediately behind them.

Matilda followed the direction of his glance. Then, intimidated by the ornate splendour of the mansion pointed out, faintly shook her head as her eyes strayed apologetically in the direction of her battered trunk. It was certainly not fit for even the most temporary sojourn in such dazzling halls.

"Oh, I don't think—," she began uncertainly.

But he caught her up with decision.

"It will not be the slightest trouble," he urged. "And you really need to repose yourself for a little while before you resume your journey, after a mishap such as this."

"But—" began Matilda.

"And I will have another cab called to take you to your destination as soon as you feel equal to the effort."

To Matilda, weary and almost faint for food—so early had she eaten her meagre breakfast that morning—the programme outlined sounded most alluring. A real oasis in the desert, she reflected. And yet, in spite of his reassuring words, she felt very undecided. After all had she any right to impose herself, a perfect stranger, on his hospitality? Was it, perhaps, for just such an occasion as this one that Miss Sara Ann Nixon had warned her so Biblically and solemnly that no good ever came of making chance acquaintances when travelling? Matilda knew exactly what that fine old crusted disciplinarian would have remarked had she heard the unconventional invitation given. Matilda could not only vividly picture the throwing up of her fat,

beringed hands—the expression of horror on her countenance—but she could also hear the biting observation to which she would give utterance, as to its propriety, as well.

“Not to be contemplated for a second, Miss Horsey: I marvel at your even considering of such a suggestion. And what pray, would Mrs. Nixon, my never-to-be-forgotten parent, have said?”

What, indeed? For even Matilda, impatient as she had been of the stringent laws of etiquette as laid down by the late lamented Mrs. Nixon, for the guidance of her four virgin daughters and those daughters’ pupils, could not but admit that here was indeed an experience of the most unexpected, and a situation of the most delicate: whilst the bare idea of acceptance of such an invitation on her part would have caused nearly every inmate of the Swallow’s Nest to stare aghast: and to exclaim in perfectly bred stupefaction.

Matilda shivered: and was glad to remember she was a good many miles away already from her old life. Still on the threshold of this new existence did it not behove her to pause—and consider? Consider conscientiously whither her careless step was wending its fatal way, already: now that she had gained a partial if transient measure of personal liberty. On some such lines as these, no doubt, would Miss Sara Ann’s exhortation have run—and run most eloquently too.

Ah, well, it was true: a young and unprotected female could not be too careful, too prudent. It was a great pity. And Matilda stifled a rebellious sigh. But there seemed no help for it. Clear was the path: and she must do her duty as Nelson had done, before her. She must firmly but politely decline—and proceed on her way. No matter how romantic the project looked; or, distracting thought, what a remarkable first entry it would have proved with which to start the celebrated diary she was under promise to keep. No—the Nelson touch for her—the Misses Nixon should yet be proud of her. She must decidedly do the

right thing; no matter at what heavy cost to her inmost inclinations.

Buoyed up by this most excellent resolution she hesitated no longer. Once more she looked up from the shadow of her bonnet: her eyes a thought wistful perhaps; but her mind entirely made up.

"You are too kind, sir—," she began.

"Then that's settled," he returned promptly: and, with that, the young man pulled a handful of silver out of his trouser-pocket and endowed the astonished cabman with it all.

Even then Matilda did not realize the wrong impression under which he was labouring.

"And I shall be much obligated to you, sir," she was continuing in her pretty, prim way: but before she could finish the sentence, and ask, as she intended to, for another cab to be whistled up, her rescuer tucking her arm firmly in his began to lead her away from the scene of the accident: and before she quite knew what was happening, a little breathless at the suddenness of it all and extremely agitated at such a dreadful misunderstanding of her intentions and wishes, Matilda found herself under his guidance mounting the stone steps of the dwelling he had previously pointed out. And at the same time he was assuring her in the most civil fashion that the obligation, if there were one, was entirely his. And that he personally considered her to be an unusually courageous young lady. Matilda, however, was uneasily certain that Miss Sara Ann Nixon would have employed another adjective and a less complimentary one in describing her character at the moment. Something in the nature of brass probably. Again Matilda felt that life was very tiresome when, with the best intentions in the world, one found oneself unable to pursue the right and proper course of action laid down by one's elders, and this not at all from one's own volition; when, all of a sudden, with one of those swift changes of mood which were so characteristic of her she decided to let things drift and

allow Fate to have it her own way. She would waste no more time on what Miss Sara Ann would have wished her to say or do: no one could say she had not made an effort—but now Fate evidently held the scales and must do the deciding.

And so, hesitant a little, yet unaccountably attracted by his dominating charm and good looks—and leaning for the first time on his arm—Matilda passed with her preserver through the staring, murmuring crowd with bent head; and the door of the mansion closed behind the two young people. “Well, I’m dashed,” said the cabman scratching his head in visible perplexity. “That’s a rum cove if you like. Gives me a pund in loose silver—and fur wot? It wasn’t his accident, was it, gents?”

Public opinion agreed with him that the accident was none of the young man’s business. “A hinterfering young sultan, that’s what I calls him,” grumbled the aggrieved Jehu returning to his cab and wheezing horse: now once again perched upon its thin legs and looking if possible even more battered and the worse for wear, than before.

“Wot do you make of it, Ginger?” he continued, feeling the animal’s hocks with care. “He’s a queer cove to come breezing out from nowhere, as you might say; and take off the little gal as cool as a cucumber.”

He laid Matilda’s modest luggage carefully on the pavement, then paused for a moment to contemplate it inimically. “No more tin trunks for me,” he muttered. Then climbing up to his box seat he wrapt his knees in a faded horse blanket, shook the reins, and added to the last few loiterers still lounging round,

“That little gal’s a hussey: and as bold as brass.” To which opinion most of the bystanders cordially assented. And so on a wave of popular sympathy he passed from the scene.

Perhaps this speedy justification of Miss Sara Ann Nixon’s point of view might have served as a warning to Matilda could she have known of it, but she was by then standing in the hall whilst her escort issued suave but per-

emptory orders for the immediate rescue of her luggage from the street.

A couple of tremendous, powdered and tagged gods, as it seemed to Matilda, received with unbending severity of aspect these instructions and proceeded instantly forth, with freezing dignity, into the square to carry them out. Such glacial calm Matilda had not met before.

"Oh," she murmured, "I seem to be giving so much trouble."

The young Cæsar met her disturbed glance merrily enough. "Fiddlesticks," he returned, "that's what they are here for." And, again offering her his arm, he now led her up a very fine and broad staircase hung with great oil paintings of ancient battle-pieces, full of cannon and smoke and agitation. Pictures which Matilda, regarding with a hurried eye as she fluttered by, privately thought extremely terrifying. Little did she dream that there might come a day when she would be so accustomed to these scenes of carnage that she would cease to regard them as anything more than decorative panels. Across a wide landing on which several doors opened he conducted her.

"And now, here we are," he announced flinging wide a pair of mahogany doors which faced them. Then with a gesture of courteous invitation he stood back for her to pass before him into the room.

Matilda with a little bend of her head stepped lightly over the threshold. She found herself in a large drawing-room, the magnificence of which for the moment quite bereft her of speech. "Oh," she breathed, for never before had she encountered such splendour.

Too confused in the fast failing light to take in details, she merely then received an impression of dazzling chandeliers of cut glass on which the firelight sparkled; of wide windows hung with gold and white brocade; of walls of gold and white panelling broken here and there by china-cased cabinets; of pictures that seemed to be mainly landscapes in delicate water-colour; of a wide mirror that

seemed to go out of its way to reflect her dowdy little figure to her great discomfort; and, finally, as a welcome haven of refuge, she became aware of a marble fireplace, in which a blazing fire seemed to roar halfway up the chimney, and before which was grouped a small sofa, a low table, and a couple of arm-chairs. This asylum amidst so much formal brilliance instantly became her Mecca.

But for the moment, overweighted by the contemplation of so much fashionable elegance, Matilda halted dead just inside the door; for she was experiencing a dreadful sensation of foreboding. This was no place for her—a little governess. Even if she could boast fifteen golden sovereigns to her name.

"Oh," she cried in much distress of mind, "I shouldn't have given way. I meant to say 'No,' quite distinctly: indeed I did. It was very wrong of me. No well brought up young lady would have permitted herself—indeed I should not have come, please, please—" She clasped her hands in a great and increasing agitation. "Please allow them to call me a cab, quick. And let me resume my journey, sir."

But this her host could not be persuaded to do. He shook his head with decision. "Come, come," he urged good-humouredly enough but with a hint of amusement in his air. "Come, come, I assure you there is nothing to agitate yourself about, madam. I am merely, if I may be so conceited as to remind you of it, carrying out the rôle of the good Samaritan."

Matilda considered the point. "Only I didn't fall amongst thieves," she objected.

"But you might have," he retorted, "if I hadn't arrived on the scene. Anyway the principle is the same: you must as a young lady of sense agree to that, at least."

And with that Matilda had to content herself: for without waiting for any further objections on her part he took her by the hand and led her up to the fireplace.

And, having no alternative, Matilda sank on to the sofa

and began to wonder if she was perhaps making too much fuss.

"Now you must have some refreshment," continued her host. "No—I insist—" He waved aside her timid demurring and striding to the bell rope pulled it with vigour. "And then I am sure you will feel ever so much better."

"Do you think so?" asked Matilda, her eyes on the dancing flames.

"Certainly," he returned, "for I'm pretty peckish myself. And I'm sure you look as if you needed something much more sustaining than a mere dish of tea."

He moved away to the window as he spoke to look out into the street whilst Matilda remained in silent contemplation of the fire.

After a few moments the entrance of a portly butler roused her from her reflections. A look of faint surprise crossed the immobile features of the newcomer. But before he could utter a word he was desired peremptorily enough to bring in tea—and at once. And with a low-voiced word or two he hurried away on his mission.

The voice of the tempter spoke again. "It's lucky I was standing at this window when I saw your cab topple over."

Matilda looked up. "I'm afraid I've been very remiss, sir," she said, "I have hardly thanked you——"

"Rubbish," said he cheerfully. "It was my plain duty."

As he anticipated, his attitude began to have its due effect on Matilda; and although she still sat on the very edge of the sofa with the air of a bird about to take wing, that projected flight into space did not seem to be so imminent as it had only a few seconds previously. Which the young man noted with a feeling of almost tender amusement. Such a little creature it looked sitting there so upright and so solitary.

"Poor little homely body," he thought, "she shall at least have a half hour of peace and comfort after so dismaying an experience. What can her parents be thinking of to send her travelling all alone?"

Casually, and anxious not to embarrass the prim little soul, he strolled back to the fireplace. "Your luggage is indoors," he announced, "and the famous cabriolet and Ginger have departed. And if I may venture to say so—a good riddance."

"I suppose so," assented Matilda as he seemed to expect a reply. But at the moment she was almost finding it in her heart to wish herself back in the despised chariot.

There ensued then a silence during which the young man leant against the chimney piece covertly watching Matilda. But of his scrutiny she was quite unaware for her thoughts had wandered to her late Jehu and his odd philosophies.

"I wonder why he hated cats so," she murmured at last.

"Perhaps they made his horse shy," suggested her host idly: his eyes still on Matilda where she sat in the gathering dusk clutching tightly in either hand her reticule and umbrella. Both of which possessions she had never for one instant relinquished. "Poor child," he thought, "I wonder who she is? And where is she going? But I daren't ask her. She'd die of alarm if I ventured so far. And what a cruelty to dress her up like that. She's nothing but an amorphous bundle of ill-fitting garments. And, in Heaven's name, who chose that bonnet for her?"

Perhaps most fortunately for Matilda's peace of mind she had no clue to his reflections: and the butler returning at that moment with two satellites to arrange the tea-table, draw the curtains and light up, and generally shut out the raw evening, she began to look round her with more interest.

Matilda was never very long a prey to dismal cogitations. It was indeed a beautiful room, she decided. And just such another would she have loved to own had she been brought up in other circumstances. She particularly admired a wonderful group of china figures playing on musical instruments that stood on the mantelpiece. Also a china parrot, most vividly coloured.

The sudden impatient demand, as the butler and his henchman were withdrawing in good order, from the young

man lounging against the fireplace, that tea must be produced in less than five minutes, "Or there'd be the dickens to pay," turned Matilda's attention towards her rescuer again.

"He makes it sound like a conjuring trick," she thought, as he followed up his forcible pronouncement with an energetic though totally unnecessary onslaught on the already blazing fire. That done he threw himself in his careless, long-legged way into an armchair close by.

"Have you far to go still?" he asked.

"No," faltered Matilda, "but I ought to be there. I don't know what they will think——"

Another cold wave of apprehension at this horrific notion overwhelming her, again she drooped into a silence so dejected that her host was almost minded to let her go then and there—tea or no tea. It seemed such plain cruelty to keep her. However an undefined but, none the less, strong desire to woo this quaint small being to talk to him—dull as he was and bored with life—to set her at her ease, rose up within him; and like the Pharaoh of old he hardened his heart.

In after years looking back on this their first encounter he was inclined to believe that Matilda had already cast a spell on him. For he could never quite satisfactorily explain to himself why he, one of the most easily bored and fastidious of mortals, should have felt so loath to let her go: an unsophisticated country girl and fresh out of a school as she was too. But this he did not know at the moment.

"Come," he urged, and he bent forward to attack, with much energy and the gleaming steel poker, the glowing coals once more. "Come, don't worry yourself so. May I give you a word of advice?" His merry look sought Matilda's. "I am very good at giving advice," he added complacently.

Matilda suppressed a sigh. Was the whole world bent on giving her advice?

"Of course you are under no obligation to take it," he

remarked, evidently reading her thoughts with uncanny skill, as it appeared to Matilda.

Impressively, to point the moral, he waved the poker at her. "I don't know who you are, or where you are going," he continued. "Accident, pure and simple, has caused our paths to cross—and no blame can be attached to you if you are late in reaching your destination. For none of us can help an accident. But do let me beg of you never to cross a bridge till you reach it—actually get to it."

"I never do," returned Matilda opening her eyes to their widest extent: and taking this oratorical effort quite literally. "I never do: how could I?"

Commiseratingly he shook his head at her. "I was speaking metaphorically," he explained.

"Oh," said Matilda.

Again he brandished the poker. "I hope you are not of a terribly serious-minded character," he continued.

Matilda considered. "Oh, no, I don't think so," she reassured him sweetly.

"That's good," he cried with an air of relief. "Further—" And then broke off whatever he had been going to say.

"Have you ever ridden to hounds?" he demanded.

Matilda looked at him quite seriously for a moment and then for the second time on that momentous day she laughed her characteristic laugh of unalloyed amusement.

"No," she cried, "my horse was a donkey. And a very old one. I think it must have been an original inmate of Noah's Ark. He would only move if you placed a carrot right in front of his silly old nose. I wish you could have seen old Solomon." Again she laughed at the recollection. And for the second time that day she appeared in a totally different and new light to a fellow creature. And one of the all-conquering male sex, too.

Little did that astute lawyer Mr. Francis imagine he was to share a similar experience with this young man within the space of a bare couple of hours.

Matilda's host let the poker fall into the fender with a loud crash.

Like Mr. Francis before him the extraordinary transformation, there was no other word for it, bereft him of speech. Much as a schoolboy might have he stared at her. And with an astonishment that was almost schoolboyishly naïve.

Now—in a flash—he knew why he had not let her go as she wished.

It was in order that he might hear her laugh.

That was, certainly, it. Ridiculous, if you like, he was quite prepared to admit that, but—well, there it was.

And to him as to the elderly lawyer Matilda did not even seem to be any longer the merely dowdy little schoolgirl he had thought her: to be petted and soothed and sent on her way and forgotten. Eagerly he began to speculate as to how she might look if she were bereft of the heavy jacket and monstrously old-fashioned bonnet.

"That was clumsy," chided Matilda, alluding to the crash which had made her jump.

Pulling himself together under this rebuke, her host apologized handsomely and resumed the thread of his discourse.

"As I was observing," he continued, his eye on her now for any change of expression she might show, "if you had ever ridden to hounds you would know that a good horse takes his fences lightly——"

"Yes," said Matilda politely.

"So if you have to meet trouble—encounter it as a hunter negotiates a fence: with decision but not heavily."

Matilda looked extremely impressed.

"That, I am sure, is an excellent piece of advice," she remarked. Her gravity amused her host.

"It is worth its weight in gold," he replied. "I make you a present of it. Ah, here is tea——"

He broke off his half-bantering speech to indicate the solemn procession now converging on them with all the

paraphernalia of afternoon tea at its most sumptuous and formal.

Unconsciously Matilda's face brightened, for she was really extremely hungry, and her eyes strayed over the rich array of cakes and bread and butter and toasted edibles with open appreciation. This moment of natural anticipation appearing auspicious to the young man, he ventured to risk begging her to lay aside her mantle and bonnet.

"I am sure no one could eat a morsel with pleasure all bundled up as you are," he urged.

Matilda returned his glance uncertainly.

"Don't you think so?" she asked.

"Certain of it," said he.

And so falling in with his whim Matilda divested herself of her out-of-door garments, and immediately appeared years younger to the intrigued eyes of her host.

"By George," said he as Matilda, laying aside the disfiguring garments, reseated herself on the sofa.

In fact as "Chawles" the second footman confided to Mrs. Fenton the housekeeper later that same evening, "she looked the sweetest little thing a-sitting there on the sofy in a bottle-green cashmere with a devilish neat waistband and the nattiest of collars and cuffs."

Unaware of the deep admiration she was arousing in more than one manly breast, Matilda turned to her host a shade anxiously.

"You must pardon my being in my everyday gown," she said. "If I had had the slightest idea of what was going to happen, I should have put on my best poplin and my cameo brooch."

On hearing this ingenuous assertion a curious spasm attacked the rubicund physiognomy of the butler who was now engaged in giving the final touches to the tea-table which always raise it from the ordinary to a work of art. Unfitting as he knew it to be he nearly smiled: for Matilda was altogether a new specimen to him and—quite curious. Worth watching, one might say. His eye, however, meeting

his master's stern glance he coughed deprecatingly and announced that "tea was served."

Matilda's host nodded.

"You needn't wait—any of you," he commanded.

And then he turned to Matilda.

"But I like your dress enormously," he assured her.

Matilda could hardly believe it.

"I do so hate bottle green, myself," she confessed, "although it is so serviceable."

And that was the last remark the butler and his satellites heard as they retreated in good order—but all agape with curiosity.

Behind the closed doors the two were rapidly making friends. For Matilda, shaking a stray and obstinate ringlet out of her eyes and casting dull care behind her at last, had been invited to pour out tea. And all agog with a delightful girlish importance was busying herself with the delicate Sevres cups and saucers: thoroughly absorbed in her tea-making task, and quite unconscious of the open admiration shining in her host's bold blue eyes.

"Do you take sugar?" she asked, as she poised the tongs in midair.

It appeared that he did not.

"I love sugar," returned Matilda pensively, as she handed him his cup of tea duly be-creamed at least.

"Sweets to the sweet," he quoted and, rising, with a deep obeisance handed her the silver sugar-bowl.

Matilda dimpled.

"I mustn't be greedy," she cried, "Miss Sara Ann Nixon, my schoolmistress, never allowed her pupils but one small lump—she considered sugar fattening."

Her host laughed.

"Very ingenious," he remarked, "but as that no doubt estimable woman is not here I think we might proceed on more generous lines, eh? Besides there is an old saying—'when the cat's away'——"

"The mice will play," finished Matilda.

And thus encouraged the little puss endowed the tempter with one fleeting look—and then her eyes fell to the sugar-bowl.

“Dare I take three lumps?” she whispered.

“You dare indeed,” he assured her.

So the three lumps dropped rhythmically, and to her complete content, into her cup.

After which Matilda sighed a sigh of great satisfaction. She was really beginning to feel like Rosalind “in a holiday humour.” And when she was handed a perfectly toasted muffin she was very near becoming quite reckless.

“Where was this boarding school of yours?” asked her host as he returned the muffin dish to the fender to keep its contents as piping hot as all well-toasted muffins should be.

“In the country,” replied Matilda. “It belonged to four old ladies. Miss Sara Ann has lived in four reigns—she is quite historical.”

“I don’t doubt it,” said he.

“She is the head mistress, and remembers the Prince Regent and his lovely palace at Brighton perfectly.”

“Really?” asked the young man. “Did she ever pass the time of day with that portly personage?”

Matilda looked at him over her teacup.

“She saw him driving his own curricule once,” she returned. “It was such an impressive sight that she nearly swooned, with excitement.”

“They were great days,” said he.

“Indeed, yes,” replied Matilda and she finished her muffin.

Her host noticing the empty condition of her plate fished up the muffin dish.

“I’d rather have a piece of cake, if I may,” said Matilda.

Obediently he replaced the dish; and, getting up, cut her a large slice.

“Tell me more about your school,” he said, handing it to

her. "What were the other three old ladies like? You know I never had any sisters so I know nothing about young ladies' seminaries. The very thought of them fills me with awe."

"Miss Janet was fat and wore a sandy wig and did the housekeeping," said Matilda. "Miss Julia—I liked her best—she had a deep voice and taught the piano."

"Can you play the piano?"

"Oh, yes," said Matilda, "But I never was very fond of my lessons because Miss Julia used to hold my wrists so much, it made me feel quite sleepy."

"How singular," said he, "go on."

"Miss Agnes was the youngest and wore her collars of lace, and long gold ear-rings. All her sisters considered her quite a girl——"

"How old was she?"

"Quite old—about forty, I suppose," said Matilda. "Once she wanted to go away and start a school of her own in London. But they were all so terribly upset she had to abandon the idea."

"She must have been a very weak character," commented the young man.

Matilda considered the judgment, but did not feel that her knowledge of Miss Agnes agreed at all with this estimation of her nature.

"Oh, no," she said earnestly, "Miss Agnes was not weak. But she did not wish to be thought frivolous and heartless. You see Miss Sara Ann warned her such a rushing out into the world could only lead her into trouble. It was a presumption on her part to start a school in the metropolis—especially for a woman of her years. She was then about thirty."

"A great age," smiled the young man. "It seems to me your Miss Agnes was too dashing."

"They considered she was apt to set too high a value on her talents. And what was good enough for them should be good enough for her. And they did not want her to get into

the public eye. So she cried a good deal and gave in. That was ten years ago," finished Matilda.

Her host stirred his tea thoughtfully and then proceeded to lay down his views on the crisis she had described before Matilda. He was of opinion that underneath such a way of thinking there had been a good deal of sisterly jealousy.

"It is wonderful," he pointed out, "how we can deceive ourselves as to our motives in interfering with other people's lives."

"Were you happy at this school?" he asked abruptly.

Wishful to be in the highest degree accurate, Matilda made answer.

"Off and on," said she, "I was very hard worked, you know. And I hated getting up so early. In winter it used to be black as pitch when the rising bell rang. And so cold!"

She shivered at the very recollection.

"Then you have left—" he hazarded.

Matilda assented.

"And I am so glad—," she cried impulsively; then she came to an unexpected halt, as she perceived that she was monopolizing the conversation almost entirely. A most unbecoming and egotistical method of procedure, as Miss Sara Ann herself had often pointed out.

"Oh," she cried, "here I am chattering all about my school when you can't possibly be interested in me, or it. I am not deserving of so much attention, sir, I fear. You will think I have been bred up very carelessly: please pardon my foolish chatter. For it must seem that to you."

Her open distress at having been guilty of such a dereliction of duty, at having fallen away so completely from the prescribed standard of good manners, quite captivated the young man's fancy. Quickly he hastened to explain that decorum was still unbroken. That he had been more than interested— And to woo her back to confidence he begged her to tell him more about her school and its inhabitants.

"Was there no one you were regretful to leave?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," returned Matilda, "I was very fond of Monsieur de Solanges, our French master. He was quite old and had lost all his relations when he was a boy in that dreadful French Revolution."

She opened her eyes wide as one who had listened to tales of bloodshed with sympathetic horror.

"Most of them had 'looked out of the little window,' he used to say."

"Ah," said her host "those were strange, cruel times."

"He used to call us his 'Bijoux': and he was so amiable. I like French people."

"Do you?" asked the young man.

"French people seem to be so cheerful: and I love to laugh," explained Matilda. "I believe I must have some French blood in my veins. For Monsieur de Solanges always stoutly insisted that I had a special aptitude for his tongue. But of course," she finished a little sadly, "he may have been, as Miss Agnes said, flattering me."

"As to that of course I cannot judge," returned her host lightly, "as I have not yet had the pleasure of hearing you converse in the French language."

"And I am too shy to do so now," confessed Matilda. "But the French are very charming, I think."

To this her host agreed.

"I have a godfather of that nationality who is one of the most fascinating men I have ever met," he told her.

"Oh," said Matilda, "do you ever go to stay with him?"

He nodded.

"And I am expecting him to come over here within the next few weeks."

"How delightful," said Matilda, "I have a godfather, too. But he is, I am sorry to say, a very queer character."

If only Mr. Francis could have heard this most extraordinary utterance. He would have indeed been almost petrified with amazement.

"Queer? How is he queer?" asked Matilda's host.

Matilda paused for a moment before replying.

"He hates to be bothered," she said finally.

The young man laughed.

"That's not very odd," he said. "I hate to be bothered myself. That's nothing out of the common."

Matilda made one of her characteristic and expressive gestures.

"He's queer in other ways too."

"Well," cried her host, "be that as it may, I'm sure now you have foreign blood in your veins."

"Oh, how?" asked Matilda astonished at his perspicacity.

"By your gestures," he explained. "No complete English-woman uses gesture."

Matilda blushed a rosy red and hung her head.

"Do I gesticulate too much?" she enquired most anxiously.

"No, no, indeed."

But Matilda was quite out of countenance and could not be so easily reassured. Too often in the past had she been held up to public ridicule over her "foreign flourishings."

"Miss Agnes often rebuked me for gesticulating as I conversed," she confided, much abashed. "She called it theatrical— Do you think anyone would think me a mummer—for that is what she said I was?" she ended on a wistful note.

Stoutly her host asseverated that this was the last description he should, or, for that matter, anyone could apply to her gentle sedateness of bearing.

But still Matilda's air of doubt persisted; for to be a "froggy" she had been taught was to wear no feather in one's cap on the white cliffs of Albion.

And very tightly she now kept her hands clasped in her lap.

"Have you by any chance a French name?" enquired the young man after a moment.

"No," cried Matilda hastily. "Oh, no, indeed," quite unconsciously shaking her curls till they danced again: and

whereby once more behaving as the Misses Nixon would have felt obliged to point out in "a foreign manner."

"I wish I had—but my name is a perfectly hideous one——"

"Oh, really?"

"It is Matilda," she announced.

"Matilda," he repeated. "How quaint! somehow I should have imagined you might bear just such an old-fashioned name."

"Yes—Matilda Hope," she sighed.

"Mathilde Espérance," he translated. "It is rather pretty in French, I think."

"But I have to hear myself named in English," returned the practical little lady. "And I hate and detest the name of Matilda."

"Confidence for confidence," said he. "I don't care much for my name either."

"Don't you?"

"For my sins I was baptized Christopher Maurice——"

Matilda considered for a little and then decided that she was not entirely of his opinion.

"I rather like Christopher," she said.

"And I like Matilda," he returned and he handed her the last piece of cake on the dish.

Both of them had enjoyed an excellent meal. Matilda however did not feel equal to embarking on any further sustenance and refused the romantic morsel.

"Oh, come," cried her host, "don't you know what you're leaving? A handsome husband and ten thousand a year."

He looked so mischievously at her that Matilda could not forbear laughing.

"I can't help that——" she replied. "One must not be greedy. Besides my fate will be to marry a curate; that is all I can ever hope for. And you know curates are rarely handsome. And they never possess any money."

The entrance of the butler at this precise moment prevented her host from replying.

"Well, what is it?" he asked impatiently.

But the butler, taking not the least notice of the marked irritability with which he was greeted, handed most pompously, on a salver, a visiting card to his master.

This the young man picked up: frowned as he read the name and pencilled message on it: hesitated: considered: and finally asked, "Where is the Duchess?"

Startled, and falling fast from the clouds to mother earth again, Matilda at this remembered she, too, was shortly to number a Duchess amongst her acquaintance. With a pang she began to calculate, wonderingly, how much time she had been wasting.

"Where is Her Grace?" repeated the young man tapping the card on the edge of the mantelpiece whither he had moved.

"In the small blue drawing-room, your——"

Obedient to his master's warning gesture, the butler left the sentence uncompleted. Uncertainly the young man glanced at Matilda, moved back to the tea-table deep in thought, and quite unconsciously flung the card face upwards amongst the empty plates and cups.

"Tell Her Grace I will be with her immediately," he said.

And treading softly the butler left the room.

But Matilda, a prey to the wildest apprehensions, had jumped to her feet, distress and timidity uppermost, before the door had well shut upon him, for she had seen the name upon the card. And she knew that the sooner she was out of the house the better it would be. Poor and unknown governesses had no right to accept invitations to tea.

"Please, please, I must resume my journey at once," she panted. "I ought never to have stayed. I shall never forget your kindness, sir."

Hurriedly she tied her bonnet on, buttoned her jacket with trembling fingers, caught up her umbrella and absurd reticule all in one continuous movement, as it seemed to the astounded young man, and fled to the door. Before he could catch her up she was halfway down the stairs and actually in the hall below as he reached their head.

"Oh, may I have a cab?" he heard her cry. "I must go at once, indeed I must."

She was almost wringing her hands, so agitated was she by this time.

The young man stared after her in blank amazement; for the life of him he could not understand what had occurred to upset her so. He was about to run after her to remonstrate with her—to urge her to calm herself—to give orders for the cab she so much desired, to ask her destination—to bid her farewell—when he, in turn, received a shock of an electric nature. Behind him on the landing a well-known voice greeted him. And now he turned with a precipitation that almost exceeded his late guest's disturbance and hurry.

"Christopher, I've come to talk with you about Victoria," said the firm tones of the Duchess.

With a wry but welcoming smile that concealed, he hoped, his annoyance at being discovered in so absurd a situation, he abandoned Matilda, albeit unwillingly enough, to her fate and to the ministrations of his servants in the hall below, and led with marked haste his new visitor away from the zone of danger. Making conversation with unusual assiduity he took her back into the blue drawing-room, which he was glad to remember looked over a particularly dull courtyard at the rear of the house, and led her to a seat.

Mercifully, he realized, that Matilda had been out of sight, if not of earshot, from where the Duchess had stood. Skirts flying and a bonnet she might have glimpsed. But as to the identity of their wearer he was happy to believe she could not have hazarded a guess.

Which was just as well.

It was not, however, till he fancied he heard faintly the wheels of a departing cab—pure imagination although it might be—above the Duchess's well-rounded and explanatory periods with regard to her daughter's wayward conduct, that he breathed with any sense of security or

could devote any attention to the arguments of his future mother-in-law.

Gone was his little Cinderella without a trace: and leaving a curious, flat feeling behind her in his mind.

Silently listening to the Duchess's lucid exposition of the duties and privileges of the engaged man, he was forced to admit that the child—a mere nobody no doubt—yet was more fascinating than any female of his acquaintance, young or old—a dangerous admission—and that he very much wanted to see her again. But that way madness lay. And no one knew it better than he. Ah, well, most probably he would never set eyes on her again. Best so. Matilda—an odd, quaint name—an engaging creature.

"Now where is this absurd ring?" the Duchess was asking. "Is it still at St. George's?"

Christopher Maurice Carysfort, Marquis of Lassington, thus cornered, had to recall his wandering wits.

Whilst shrunk into the farthest corner of her new conveyance Matilda sat thanking Heaven tremblingly for her escape.

In the hall of the house she had just left "Chawles" pondered on the address given him to transmit to the cabman as his destination.

And in the meantime Mr. Wicks was himself taking a most important letter to the post at the very moment that the listless fiancé of Lady Victoria once more remitted his despised *gagé d'amour* to her self-possessed mama, in order that it might duly grace the right digit on that headstrong young person's hand and thus afford no loophole for gossip. An excellent mission.

Having refused refreshment the Duchess took her leave.

"Don't let Victoria quarrel with you, Doodles," was her parting admonition. "The girl has no ballast as yet."

And then on the very staircase itself she shot her bolt. "And pray don't allow it to come to her ears that you give young ladies afternoon tea—unchaperoned. However delightful those young women may be."

CHAPTER V

SKETCHES THE ARRIVAL OF MATILDA AT TILNEY HOUSE:
AND DESCRIBES HER FIRST MEETING WITH LORD GEORGE
AND HIS TWIN SISTERS

STILL all of a tremble, and with her temporarily neglected conscience now actively at work, rebuking and remonstrating in such a style as even the Misses Nixon could not have bettered, Matilda breathed a heartfelt prayer of gratitude for shipwreck so narrowly averted at almost the outset of her voyage, when, at last, her new conveyance drove into the flagged courtyard of Tilney House and came to a standstill under its square and much decorated portico.

For, no matter what might in these new surroundings be before her of difficult or distressing in the future, she had at least reached her present journey's end. She was for the moment in harbour at any rate.

Matilda felt that this in itself was certainly something to thank Heaven for.

She was out of the cab—a less ancient specimen this—and had paid the driver most exactly in sixpennies and small halfpence—which set him caustically enquiring, “how long she might have been saving up for this ’ere drive?”—some seconds before one of the two liveried flunkies lounging in a tall window summoned up sufficient energy to open the door for her and assist her to enter, bag and baggage, the scene of her future labours.

Gravely and in complete silence he and his fellow servant carried her tin trunk inside; brought in with a significant

lift of supercilious eyebrows her wretched little carpet-bag and closed the outer portals on the world once more.

A deep stillness, an unbroken, even overawing calm pervaded the ducal halls: and Matilda coming to a timid halt looked to these frigid officials for further guidance, hardly daring herself to disturb the hushed quiet in which the place was enwrapt.

For a moment she had an odd fancy that just so mute must have been the palace of the Sleeping Beauty in her favourite fairy tale.

But it was only a matter of seconds before she realized that of direction or counsel there was to be none. Sorrowfully it was borne in on her mind that it appeared to be their august intention to take no further interest in her movements.

In short to sink into completely indifferent inaction as far as she was concerned.

Matilda—with recollections of other household officials at the “Nest” surging in on her—supposed she was as usual, none of their business: and decidedly embarrassing, too. But that they were not concerned with the bestowal of new governesses was very evident to her as with a sinking heart she took a few undecided steps farther into the hall; and then resolved that she must and would wait for instructions as to what her next move should be. Alas, as the gilt clock on a distant bracket sonorously ticked away, it became more and more patent to her that once inside the place they had abandoned her and her luggage completely.

Robinson Crusoe on his famous desert isle never felt at a greater loss than did Matilda.

It is true that one of these remote beings after a low-voiced colloquy with his coadjutor strode over to the fireplace to pull lackadaisically enough at a long bell rope which hung close at hand. And that whilst lounging across the tessellated pavement of the floor he muttered something about “it’s not being his work and he took no responsibility:

if people came in like dukes, and expected to be treated like duchesses, they'd soon get shown what was what, they would."

But what these unknown persons were to be shown was not very clear to Matilda who could not venture to believe that her more than modest arrival could be described in such terms.

However after executing this manœuvre and giving utterance to this dark saying he strode back at a brisker pace to rejoin his fellow servant in the embrasure of one of the tall windows, which looked out on the courtyard and through a pillared stone screen to the street beyond, and resumed his low-voiced conversation with that functionary in so decided a manner that Matilda felt quite unequal to disturbing him in any way.

Minute succeeded minute as she remained forgotten by her luggage in the middle of the outer vestibule of the Westmainham town house; again clutching tightly at her umbrella for comfort.

Much would she have liked to wander over to the fire and warm her cold hands at its cheerful blaze. But thoroughly intimidated by such formidable aloofness her courage was not equal either to asking permission of such redoubtable beings; or to making any independent move on her own account.

Although Matilda would not have cared to admit it she was for the time being as one rooted to mother earth; and to have taken but two short steps in any direction would have been almost out of the question for her.

Lot's wife, herself, after her conversion into salt, was not more still.

In this severe isolation, it is not surprising to have to record that Matilda's spirit fell to zero.

Even the great canvases on the walls stared at her, she fancied, contemptuously: *odi profanum vulgus*, as it were.

Dark, eagle-faced men in pointed beards and ruffs looked majestically upon her: stiff women in huge farthingales

frowned on the observer forever from their gilded frames. Straitlaced and disdainful, wherever she turned, Matilda encountered the lofty gaze of some thin lipped personage. And one elderly dame, in particular, clad in a bright yellow dress ornamented with some kind of black trimming, seemed to convey to the tired girl in her dark look a whole world of menacing disapprobation.

"Almost as if she knew I would never make a satisfactory governess," reflected Matilda in profound dejection of spirit as she withdrew her eyes from these paintings at last to take a survey of her immediate neighbourhood.

For there really seemed nothing else to do.

From where she remained, stuck to her post, she could perceive an inner hall round which an elaborately carved and gilded staircase wound its way up and out of sight.

Somewhere up above there, Matilda supposed, she would finally find a lodgment—the sooner the better. But how soon? On that point she would have liked some definite information, indeed.

Sighing deeply she was beginning to believe she was doomed to remain precisely where she was more or less indefinitely, unless she herself made some effort to get away; or, taking her courage in both hands, went exploring into the upper regions on her own account, when she became aware that someone had come into the inner hall and was staring at her with a scrutiny that was as searching as it was unnerving.

Matilda peered into the dimly lighted distance.

Yes—the steady, unwinking stare was that of a little girl: whose face was pressed against the panes of one of the glass doors which divided the inner from the outer apartment in which she stood.

Without the slightest movement the child remained taking most obvious stock of Matilda: except that she was undoubtedly alive, because under the steady pressure against the glass her little snub nose was turning more and more

waxy at the tip, for all the movement or sound she made he might have been an image of painted wood.

"This is dreadful," thought Matilda as she stared helplessly back at the stolid apparition, totally at a loss to know what action—if any—as a preceptress she should take.

Whilst the clock ticked on in measured beats, the only sound that broke the harassing stillness.

At length, and when Matilda was beginning to feel she could not remain inactive another minute, some sound of a distant door opening or shutting disturbed the child. Swiftly she removed her nose from the glass and as swiftly winked most knowingly at Matilda: after which she vanished as mysteriously as she had arrived.

Matilda gave vent to a sigh of relief—but felt she had lost her first encounter. The unknown duellist had, as it were, got within her guard.

At the same time a door concealed in the tapestry with which the walls were covered half way, and above which the pictures were hung, opened to admit a middle-aged and foreign-looking maid.

Of the hapless Matilda, after one quick, apprising look, she took not the slightest notice: but stepping delicately to the fireplace she first warmed her hands at the blaze, and then casting a glance full of disdain over her shoulder addressed one of the whispering conspirators in the window recess.

"You rang?" she asked in a foreign way. "What was eet for, James?" It seemed that she singled out the more rosy faced of the two potentates. For he turned and indicating the luckless Matilda standing under the elaborately cut glass chandelier he observed with a backward jerk of a contemptuous thumb, "It's the new governess, Mamselle Hortense." After which, evidently not expecting or desiring further conversation, he washed his hands of Matilda forever to resume again his interminable discussion of public affairs.

The French maid shot him a look, shrugged her thin shoulders, and beckoned to Matilda.

"Why, you are but a child yourself," she said as Matilda obediently approached. "And already out in ze world so 'ard, so careless. Where is your mama? And of what does your papa dream?"

Matilda smiled. Already with the first friendly word her natural cheerfulness was restored to her.

"Why, I am an orphan," she explained. And with that air of light acceptance of her lot which was so much a part of her, she added:

"And I am really very strong—as strong as a horse."

The maid looked her up and down and shook her head decidedly.

"That is impossible to believe—as strong as a 'orse—it must be a strength of the spirit that is yours, *ma petite*," she rejoined taking a step or two away from the fire, and holding out her hand.

"You are a mere child," she continued, "but you have courage, is it not so? And that is well. But come, you come wiz me—and I take you to your room. Such were my orders, Mademoiselle."

"And my luggage?" ventured Matilda.

"That will arrive presently—with its disposal I have no concern. But give me that funny bag you 'old so tightly. I will not run away wiz it."

Thus reassured Matilda handed over her carpet-bag and followed her new mentor. Through the door in the wall she passed to find herself in a long white-washed passage lighted by a single narrow window. At the end of this corridor a winding stone staircase led to the upper floors. And up this staircase the French maid proposed to take her.

But for an unexpected check——

For to her obvious discomforture, Matilda perceived that sitting at the foot of the stairs on the lowest step and, in consequence, completely barring the way for her guide, a boy of about fourteen sat munching with every sign of en-

joyment and in the most leisurely way an enormous and very shiny currant bun.

One that might indeed have been aptly described as "the bulwark of the British nation," so solid and fortifying did it look. This lad had, Matilda noticed, a towselled head and a merry eye. And he took not the slightest notice either of the advancing maid, or of Matilda.

Dramatically Mamselle Hortense halted for a moment.

Then as the bun muncher made no move swept up to him with stony drama in her attitude.

"And what makes Your Grace here?" she demanded; her voice shrill with irritation. It was clear that Frederick Duke of Westmainham had in her opinion no right to be in that particular place at that precise instant.

Undisturbed by her disapproval the Duke regarded her with unruffled calm and continued to bite at his bun with unimpaired and serene enjoyment. Then after a moment, his mouth still so crammed with bun that it decidedly interfered with the aristocratic clearness of his diction, he replied, in a tone of careful explanation that might have annoyed the most tranquil of saints:

"I am not making anything, Hortense, I'm eating a currant bun—as you can see if your eyesight is only moderately good—and—and I've just had a scrimmage with Victoria."

"*Mon Dieu!*" cried the French maid at this announcement. "What about?"

The Duke drew himself up and looked very wise.

"That," he made cold reply, "will ever, I hope, remain a secret between myself and Victoria, but I don't mind hinting it concerned certain goldfish of mine—and I must also state unreservedly that I consider her not only a cat—but a spiteful cat. I am thinking of writing to *The Times* about it."

"Not possible," returned Lady Victoria's maid. "And you only arrived from Windsor a bare half hour."

The Duke shrugged his shoulders and took a final bite.

"Those of us who are endowed with active and bright natures can do a lot in half an hour," he replied gently. Then he raised his hand to his brow and looked beyond Hortense as a man does when he sees a strange sail on the horizon.

"You seem, Hortense," he observed, "to have a visitor standing there behind you. I do not think these old eyes have ever looked upon the lady before—you might therefore introduce us—I rather fancy her luggage, if that is a specimen you are carrying: it has a romantic air. Is she making a long stay?"

Roguishly his glance met and held Matilda's, but Mademoiselle Hortense did not take his levity in good part.

"This," she replied severely, "is the young ladies' new governess. And I should be obliged if Your Grace would move——"

"Oh," said the Duke, making no effort that could be observed by the naked eye to comply with her request, "the deuce it is. She looks much too nice to be a governess: you must see that for yourself, Hortense. Although possibly, as you are dying to remark—I can see it in your optic—it is none of my business. I must confer with the maidens Charlotte and Caroline about it."

"*Quelle bêtise*," cried Hortense: and added, "you make them very naughty."

His knees tucked up to his chin almost, the Duke bent a pitying look upon her.

"How little you understand my noble nature," he sighed. "I suppose in your dark and almost savage land you never heard of original sin? But there—I don't imagine it would be the least good trying to explain to you. Suffice it to say, that is what my sisters are suffering from—an overgenerous endowment, possibly; but who are we to interfere with the arrangements of higher powers, eh?"

"Bah," cried the Frenchwoman rudely.

"And, believe it or not as you please, Hortense, my sisters are the victims of fate and therefore to be pitied——"

"Pooh," cried the maid.

"I say it again—they cannot help themselves. But if this charming young lady is to be their governess they must be warned—" he paused and added, "only I believe you are making it all up."

Her veracity thus unceremoniously challenged, Mademoiselle Hortense's black eyes flashed as His Grace most gleefully was heard to remark on a later occasion "like a heathen idol all scintillating and baleful"—a pretty flight of fancy——

"I have no time to waste bandying words with Your Grace," she cried, "permit that we both pass, if you please."

At this, possibly scenting danger in her uncompromising manner, the Duke deemed it time to spring to his feet; and, with a low bow, proceeded to flatten himself in a most exaggerated way against the wall.

"Hortense," he remarked, "there are moments when I do not love you, peerless creature though I know you to be—there are moments when I dislike you even—but I realize you are only a benighted foreigner and you cannot help your peculiar ways."

And with a barefaced wink at Matilda he sped away down the passage before the outraged Hortense could rally her forces sufficiently to make any rejoinder. Then as he disappeared in a series of leaps, kangaroo fashion, round a corner he shouted—adding insult to injury—"No manners, Hortense," which enraged her almost to the point of apoplexy.

The Duke out of sight she turned to Matilda. "What a house—what a family!" she wailed. "But it is he who lacks manners."

Matilda, however, was not so much struck with the young Duke's manners; or want of them, as with the reflection that already she had met two members of this family who were evidently past masters in the art of conveying their meaning most eloquently by the simplest means: a mere rapid raising and lowering of the upper eyelid. An ac-

complishment of extreme significance as practised by the younger scions of this exalted house, she at once perceived.

But this train of thought was interrupted by the French maid's remarking that, for her part, she did not envy Matilda—as her pupils were as mischievous as monkeys, and of an independence of character that was alarming in its manifestations too often; and bidding her to follow her again.

So after her ruffled guide Matilda toiled upwards till they reached, without further incident, a landing some three stories higher. Here Hortense halted to announce to Matilda that on this floor the schoolroom was situated and that it was a pleasant and spacious room overlooking the garden. But, she added, she did not propose to show it to Mademoiselle at the moment as within it doubtless were the Ladies Caroline and Charlotte and she did not wish to disturb them in their studies; also it was not *comme-il-faut*, or at all necessary, that Mademoiselle should be incommoded with these little pests immediately on her arrival.

"You will see only too much of them, too soon," she predicted, as she resumed the journey and turned down a short and rather dark passage leading towards the front of the house; and, after rounding a sharp corner, Matilda treading on her heels, came to a full stop before a green painted door. This she flung open with an air disclosing to the now flushed and slightly breathless Miss Horsey a brightly lighted bedroom.

"*Voilà*," she remarked, "*enfin*, we have arrived," and waved Matilda forward.

With a sensation of heartfelt satisfaction that now she really had no further to go Matilda stepped over the threshold and dropped into the nearest chair, whilst Hortense deposited her bag in a corner.

The room was a fairly large one facing the courtyard and the street judging by the sound of the traffic which filtered through the closed and curtained windows. A fire burned

on the grate, and the carpet and curtains were warm and bright coloured.

"Much prettier and more comfortable than my old room at the Swallow's Nest," reflected Matilda, as her appreciative gaze went from the cosy little fourpost bed hung with chintz, patterned with green parrots and tropical flowers, which stood against the wall behind the door, to the armchair and the round table close to the fireplace—to the muslin hung dressing table and looking glass between the windows—the small three-cornered washstand with its blue painted basin and jug—and on to the tall boy with its gleaming brass handles which completed the furniture.

"Yes, it's delightful," she thought, "how lucky I am. I never expected anything like this."

Meanwhile Hortense had moved over to the fireplace and putting more coals on the fire made the flames dance merrily over the polished surface of the mahogany furniture.

"It is indeed a lovely room," said Matilda. "Is it my very own?"

Her ingenuous surprise at being allotted such sumptuous quarters was so marked that Hortense laughed.

"*Mais si,*" said she, "you like eet? That is well, *ma petite*. But you look so fatigued, poor child. Take off that ugly bonnet of yours, and the cloak, and come and sit here by the fire; and I myself will fetch you something to eat and drink."

This was a very welcome suggestion.

"I am tired," confessed Matilda, rapidly divesting herself of her out-of-door trappings; and she gladly submitted to the kindly ministrations of the Frenchwoman who found her slippers in the famous carpet-bag, and settled her in the armchair with a most comfortable patchwork cushion at her back.

"But it is a child," smiled Hortense as she brought a footstool for Matilda's greater and more complete ease. "And this a strange 'ouse—and you have come, *pauvrette*, to

teach a pack of little demons—so one evening you shall have peace. That is only fair, *n'est-ce-pas?*”

“How good you are to me,” said Matilda softly, and she caught Hortense by the hand.

With the lightest of fingers Hortense caressingly patted her on the cheek.

“*Non, non,*” she said, “it is nothing. I like you, *chère*—and tomorrow will be another day—then I ’ave my work and you will ’ave yours. But tonight—I please myself.”

Busily she went to and fro unpacking and laying aside Matilda’s modest belongings, which had by now made their appearance, whilst Matilda, more worn out than she admitted with her day’s experiences, nodded into a gentle doze—a delicious and drowsy state—wherein she hardly noticed the quiet departure of Hortense bent on fetching her something to eat.

Soothed by the warmth and lulled by the music of the steadily crackling fire she at length fell asleep, indeed.

From this pleasantly reposeful state she was, however, all too soon aroused by the sound of whispering and giggling in her immediate vicinity. At first the murmurings, subdued but insistent, mingled with and seemed to be a part of her dreams; but as they grew more and more positive, Matilda decided with real regret that fancy had given place to fact and she opened her eyes, although very unwillingly, and looked lazily out on the world once more.

The sight that met her glance, however, set her sitting very upright in her chair without any delay; for before her stood the little girl she had caught so dramatic a glimpse of in the hall below an hour earlier; and by the hand she grasped with extreme firmness a small boy in a Highland kilt. A young creature who, it was patent to the most casual observer, was only too wishful to hurl himself without ceremony of any kind at the sleepy Matilda. In this design he was only prevented by the stern attitude of a second young female who was tugging him back from his objective with all her might. In fact the whole group bore

a very close resemblance to the opposing teams in a tug of war; so much did the children sway and pant and pull in their wrestlings to and fro. And so absorbed were they in this strenuous tussling that for the moment they had no attention for Matilda who unnoticed sat and surveyed them with a twinkle in her eye. Here were some of the French maid's "little demons," evidently.

Matilda noticed that both little girls were of the same height and very much alike both in features and colouring; and that their dresses were made of the same tartan material. In fact the only difference that she could at first perceive lay in the fact that one child wore her dark hair in ringlets whilst the other boasted two thick pigtailed tied with tartan bows.

"These," reflected Matilda, banishing sleep entirely, "must be my pupils."

She, therefore, considering it her duty to take the initiative and taking advantage of a lull in the engagement, held out her hand and said in a clear voice:

"How do you do?"

Thus unexpectedly and formally addressed, three pairs of eyes focussed themselves speculatively on Matilda: and the child who had not been quite so actively engaged in withstanding the purposes of the small person in the kilt dropped his hand and extending her own shook Matilda's with perfect self-possession.

"How do you do?" she returned. "We thought you were asleep. We are very well, thank you."

"I'm so glad," said Matilda, duly assimilating this piece of information. "And I am quite awake now. I think I saw you downstairs," she added.

The child nodded.

"And you saw Frederick, too," she volunteered. "He liked you—that's why we came to pay our respects—like the tenants do in the country, you know—Frederick said we ought to."

"Oh," said Matilda, "that was very kind of your brother."

And she made a mental note that the volatile eater of buns promised already to be a useful and friendly ally.

"Frederick always knows who he likes," continued the child. "And we generally go by what he says."

"Do you—" began Matilda, but before she could give utterance to the idea which flashed across her mind—that to take one's opinions of strangers at second hand might lead to trouble if carried too far—the little boy who had been for the time being forgotten in this interchange of civilities decided that the moment had arrived for one last supreme effort; and breaking away from his captor, the other small maiden, strained every nerve in a frantic attempt to reach Matilda: only to find that, reckoning without his host as it were, in the very moment of victory his path was most deftly blocked by Matilda's little friend.

"How naughty, George," cried she, "you know Frederick said you were to behave."

"I *am* behaving," returned George, regarding his sister indignantly and standing a sturdy figure of truculent defiance eyeing her with challenge writ large in every feature.

So provocative was his attitude that Matilda, anxious to begin her reign at least peacefully, spoke quickly before a further interchange of belligerent remarks could be affected by either combatant.

"Let him come to me," she commanded.

Whereupon with a fat look of good-humoured triumph the little fellow elbowed his way past the crowd of two and clambered on to Matilda's knee.

"I like you," he said and held up his face for a kiss.

This ceremony completed to his satisfaction he remarked genially that he thought Matilda would play "trains" rather well and patted her hand possessively.

Both his sisters observed his behaviour with marked displeasure.

"George has no manners: he ought to be in bed," said

the child with the pigtails, breaking her watchful silence for the first time.

"As if anybody grown up ever wanted to play such a silly game as trains."

And she tossed a scornful head.

"He's only six," added she of the ringlets, and her tone was pitying in the extreme.

But the unrepentant George himself regarded his critics with unfeigned indifference as he leant indolently against Matilda.

"I can't help my age," he returned serenely. "And I shall be ath old ath you thoon, Whithkers."

His very marked lisp seemed to lend point to his speech, curiously enough, not to disfigure it.

But his confident assertion was received with a derision that might have dismayed the most lion-hearted.

"No, you won't—you can never catch me up," cried Whiskers with an emphasis that fairly shook her sturdy little frame, so violent was it.

Her brother slightly daunted by the fierceness of her denial hesitated for a moment before entering the lists again.

"Not if I keep on getting bigger and bigger?" he demanded at last.

"Not if you grew till you were black in the face," declared his sister with such an air of no compromise about her that George became a prey to acute depression for the space of three whole minutes at the least. Such a check to his belief in his own powers he had certainly not anticipated. Nor that he might go so far as to change colour in the process of expansion. This was an unlooked-for and decidedly unpleasant contingency he had never contemplated.

Apprehensively he considered the question.

But his was a resilient nature; and, finally, dismissing calculations wherein colour, or rather change of it, provoked distressing possibilities in the matter of adding, in due course, cubits to his stature, he gurgled mischievously and

turning confidentially to Matilda gazed up at her with a pair of shrewd grey eyes and launched his counter attack.

"Girls are thilly, thilly creatures," he remarked.

An ominous and armigerous movement was instantly perceptible on the part of both little girls which did not go unnoticed by the bold warrior George; who forthwith rapturously and venturously hurried on.

"I heard Fred thay tho," he explained. "And ethpethially —," his lisp became more pronounced in his earnestness, "Caroline and Whithkers."

Softly and contemplatively, and as one who communes more with himself than the world at large, he added:

"They can't help it: girlths have no brains. I think I read that in my geography book."

This adducing of printed authority staggered Lady Charlotte but not her sister whose respect for book learning was in its infancy.

"You horrid little boy," she cried, "I don't believe a word you say."

But her male relative was no whit disturbed by her fiery disdain.

"I heard Fred—" he repeated placidly and became wrapped once more in an irritating mantle of pensive meditation from which he emerged only to cry contemptuously and finally:

"Who earth about how old you are—at leatht only girlths do. I'm glad I'm not a girl."

Never had the Ladies Caroline and Charlotte been so insulted: and if their brother's intention had been to cause or raise anger—it had succeeded only too well. Bitterly they felt this last affront was too great to pass over in silence, however dignified.

There is a limit to female endurance.

Unitedly therefore, they advanced; and speaking in a kind of ecstatic and shrill chorus they most eloquently sketched out their estimate of the true character and future destiny of the desperado, George.

The Eumenides themselves were not more implacable or stone-hearted. For sheer, furious invective, Matilda considered it was easily the finest piece of declamation she had ever listened to. No statesman belabouring political opponents ever rose to greater heights. For Celtic verve and descriptive colour it could, she felt, rarely have been equalled; never, possibly, excelled. And that the still imperturbable George was from his earliest years doomed to shipwreck mental and moral—downfall—ruin—perdition—crash—smash—desolation—destruction—extinction—was an almost mild way of putting it. Effort succeeded effort: Ossa upon Pelion indeed.

But, riding the wind of this oratorical cataclysm, the unrepentant George sat unmoved and sucking his thumb mose carelessly. Whilst Matilda, fairly hypnotized into marvelling inaction, held him a little more tightly on her knee; until the Furies, a shade breathless and carried away by their own eloquence, plunged forward with the avowed intention of replacing mere words of doom by deeds and suitably chastizing the culprit for what they were pleased to consider as matchless effrontery on his part.

It was at this psychological moment that Matilda decided it was time to interfere. And not a second too soon, either.

With a benevolent autocracy that did her great credit, and much as a policeman holds up a warning hand to too swiftly advancing traffic, she made her authority felt. Reminding them that as she had only just made their acquaintance she expected the youth of Britain to rally round the flag, as it were, in the matter of good manners, and behaviour generally.

It would never do, she pointed out, to inaugurate her term of office with hair-pulling, slapping, and tears. They must see this for themselves.

A thought dashed, the Ladies Caroline and Charlotte admitted as much, and a somewhat artificial calm super-

vened. What time Lord George gazing raptly into the middle distance assumed the expression of a much misunderstood martyr to principle.

"And what," asked Matilda seeking to turn the chat into less dangerous channels, "are your names?"

Politely the curly-headed child followed Matilda's lead and reassuming her air of society and *savoir faire* proceeded to do the honours.

"I am Caroline," she explained, "and this"—she pointed a forefinger at her twin—"is Charlotte. We call her 'Whiskers' for short and because Fred says she reminds him of a pony he had once—its name was Whiskers."

"Oh, indeed," said Matilda.

"It was fat," added Lady Caroline in further explanation, "and it had a long tail."

"I have two—" remarked Lady Charlotte in complacent parenthesis.

"And Fatima is my nickname because Torie thinks I'm the most curious child she ever met. And both she and Hortense say we are little devils."

"Dear, dear," cried Matilda quite taken aback at such indifferent acceptance of so terrible a character on the part of Lady Caroline for herself and her twin. For neither child seemed to care what effect such an announcement might have on the world generally. In fact Lady Charlotte, making one of her infrequent excursions into the realm of speech, added in an almost bored tone:

"I think Mama has an idea we are little devils, too."

"Then you can't pothibly expect to go to heaven," observed Lord George calmly re-entering the arena of political discussion, dangerous although this had already proved to him.

The remark was received, as was perhaps only natural, with stony looks; and both little girls stared at him with a chilling hauteur about them that would have done credit to the Duchess herself when vexed. Coldly they drew themselves up to their fullest height; then from this pin-

nacle of icy disapprobation Lady Charlotte spoke, linking her arm in that of her twin:

"We aren't sure we want to go there—yet," said Lady Charlotte.

"Unless—" added Lady Caroline as one who had devoted long and anxious thought to the subject, "unless we are allowed to look down at London every now and then through those cracks in the sky—and we are allowed to take our new hoops with us."

At this, perilous though it was, Lord George permitted himself the luxury of a chuckle.

"You know," he said, "that Nurth Croth told you hoops weren't allowed in heaven, when there's only a sea of glath there."

Lady Charlotte sighed.

"But I can't skate," she said.

Rashly her brother pursued the unforeseen advantage.

"You'll have to," he asserted, "but I needn't wear a long night dreth like the angels do in the Thunday-at-Home book—I thall wear my kilts," he ended with an air of finality that was almost inspired.

But this assumption of authority in the matter of heavenly wearing apparel, this taking upon himself to say what he would or would not wear in those celestial regions under discussion failed, to put it vulgarly, to cut any ice with the Ladies Caroline and Charlotte.

With pitying looks for his vanity in imagining that such a subject could interest them in any way they regarded the peccant George.

"We don't care what you wear," they riposted, and Lady Caroline added:

"So long as we do not have to reside in the same mansion with you—luckily there are lots of mansions: so I don't suppose we shall have to. We shan't mind taking tea with you occasionally—if you behave yourself."

However the prospect held no glamour for Lord George: calmly he snapped his fingers at it.

"But I shan't behave—on any account," he rejoined sweetly.

"Then you'll be a great fool," retorted Lady Caroline. "Besides you're being irreverent: and I do wish you wouldn't interrupt when I'm trying to do the civil and explain who we are to our new governess."

With this she dismissed the subject of the life beyond as of no especial consequence to them at the moment, and resumed her painstaking explanations.

"That," she continued, pointing a finger at her brother, "is George."

Amiably the young sultan exchanged a second kiss with Matilda as part of the ceremonial of introduction while Lady Caroline continued:

"He's six: and he's very backward."

"We shall soon alter that," declared Matilda cheerfully.

But such was not the opinion of the meeting at all.

"He can hardly read words of two syllables yet; and he can't even do five finger exercises on the piano."

Clearly there was little or no hope for a speedy improvement.

"It's because I hate them," explained the delinquent scion of the Englishes succinctly: evidently not holding the belief that toil in itself must be regarded as a pleasure.

"When I was four I played 'Lilla's a Lady,'" returned his sister impressively, "and Charlotte played 'The Bluebells of Scotland.'"

"How splendid," said Matilda, on Lady Caroline pausing as one who expects to receive some expression of admiration for such plain evidence of work and talent wedded.

But her brother refused to be impressed.

"Music is for girlths not boyths," said he. "Fred dothent have to play the piano. And I shan't when I go to Eton."

A shrewd estimation of the strength of his position left his sister for once without an answer. Hastily she resumed her narration before she lost more ground.

"Then there's baby—her name is Amelia. She's very spoiled and she's in the nursery still—and sometimes, at night, she finds a poodle dog under her bed. And Nurse Cross has to give her slices of bread and butter covered with sugar, or she won't go to sleep again."

"Dear me," said Matilda. "Perhaps one day she may find a real poodle dog, and what would she do then?"

This possibility amused Lady Charlotte and she laughed heartily.

"I expect she'd scream the place down," she said.

But the eyes of the unregenerate George were gleaming with a new and prodigious idea which had just occurred to him.

"I believe I thall find a horth under my bed tonight," he announced softly, "a big, brown one named Polythemuth."

The suggestion was not received with enthusiasm.

"Nonsense," said Lady Caroline sharply, "copy-cat! Besides that's an absurd name to choose for a horse: he ought to be called Tony, or something easy, anyway."

Lord George frowned.

"He's my horth," he returned. "I've just decided on him, myself. And he ith called Polythemuth."

"Where did you get that name?" asked Lady Charlotte abruptly.

Her brother, thus challenged as to his sources of knowledge, considered the question.

"In the Bible," he finally remarked in tones of the firmest conviction.

Lady Charlotte looked him up and down. "That's a lie," said she: and relapsed into silence, whilst Lady Caroline resumed her lightning sketches of the family.

"Frederick is at Eton," she continued, "and he's a wet bob. And Torie is grown up and goes to balls."

Matilda sighed softly.

How much in her secret heart she wished she might be in a position to go to balls she herself alone knew. But

she was only too well aware that such delightful and gay functions were not for her and did her best to curb the rising tide of longing in her young heart.

"And now I must tell you my name," she said, cheerfully looking from one to the other of her new charges.

All three children nodded gravely for without this information the ceremony of introduction would not have been, to their mind, at all complete.

"My name is Horsey," said Matilda.

On learning which Lady Charlotte was guilty of a giggle which she vainly endeavoured to strangle at birth: her brother more ingenuous and less sophisticated gurgled openly.

"What a funny name," he cried, "Horth—Horthy. But you look more like a pony—a Shetland pony."

Gravely he observed Matilda as though he half expected her to perform some curious feat of changing into a mettlesome steed before his very eyes: but this attitude of interested expectation was too much for his sisters and both little girls burst out laughing.

"Oh, George," they cried, "you are a silly boy."

And then Lady Caroline turned to Matilda in apology for so marked a falling away from good manners.

"You see we never had a governess named after an animal before," she explained, and solemnly they too stared, round-eyed, at Matilda.

"Haven't you?" she asked, rather amused. "But there are people called 'Fox' and people called 'Wolf' sometimes, you know."

"Oh, that's different," objected Lady Caroline, "but Horsey is such a queer name. Do we call you Horsey?" she demanded incredulously.

Her tone of absolute scepticism set Matilda off in her turn and her laugh rang out as merrily as the children's had done.

"I'm afraid you must," she admitted. "I suppose it is an odd name. But I didn't choose it myself."

Lady Charlotte regarded her most sympathetically.

"No," she said slowly, "your godfathers and godmothers did that for you—it's all in the catechism. I have often thought it was a pity they could choose such horrid names for poor babies. Fancy making me a Charlotte—a pudding made of apples. I hate apples."

She sighed deeply.

"And they are so good for one," she ended.

"All good things for children are nathty," remarked Lord George: a piece of sapience of which his sister took no notice.

"And Caroline—her," she continued, indicating with a raised forefinger her amazed twin who had not expected such a flow of oratory and in consequence was gazing at her sister with open mouth.

"She ought to have been called plain—Jane."

Thus astonishingly, and as it were unexpectedly re-christened and without the slightest warning too, Lady Caroline gave vent to a bleat of distressed protest.

"Oh, no, Whiskers," she begged emotionally, "not Jane—you remember the nursemaid before Susan. Her name was Jane and she squinted so dreadfully that Mama used to say she was as cross-eyed as a Maltese. And I'm sure I'm not that—not a Maltese, please."

"Cat?" demanded Lord George in a stage whisper of Matilda.

"No, no, a person—of Maltese extraction," carefully explained Miss Horsey entering on her career of the imparting of knowledge to the young idea.

"Extraction—that's a food," quoth Lord George thoughtfully. "I've heard Hortenth thay cook uses too many extractions."

"Then you'd better not let Mrs. Lake hear you repeat it," advised Lady Charlotte: whilst Lady Caroline looked more and more bewildered at so much irrelevant talk. Wearily, however, she stuck to her point.

"I mean a person—a native—a squinter—" she said.

"They all squint in Malta; I heard Mama say so. Just like Jane did. I wouldn't be a 'Jane' for the world."

The prospect was so clearly an unwelcome one to her and her distress at it so marked that Matilda quite expected Lady Charlotte to cease teasing her twin and drop a subject so distasteful. But it seemed she had more to say on the point yet.

"I can't help that," she returned with decision, "your name should have been Jane—or Lucy."

At which Lady Caroline quite groaned; for here was yet another appellation fastened on her with extreme rapidity and for no reason that she could understand. She was just about to say that she considered her sister was taking unwarrantable liberties with her, when Lord George raised his head and took the reins of conversation into his own chubby hands for a third time. Remembering the result of his other two efforts Matilda was a little inclined to be apprehensive of this new one. But as yet being so new to her post she hardly liked to nip the conversational bud in its infancy.

"Godmothers don't give nameths, Whithkers," he asserted. "Because I asked Kincaid oneth, and she thaid I was a fool—and only parents gave their children nameths."

Triumphantly he ended his peroration and looked round his small circle for assent, if not applause. But his sister was not to be discomforted so easily by a mere youngster only half out of the nursery, and still very much subject to its laws.

"Can't parents be godmothers and godfathers, too?" she demanded.

This was an unlooked for check, and Lord George considered the point gloomily.

"Yeth," he replied, his small jaw fallen, "but that's not fair——"

Completely and complacently satisfied at having for once defeated her brother conversationally, at least, Lady Charlotte was about to speak again when the door opened

to admit—much to the children's dismay—Mademoiselle Hortense with a tray full of supper for Matilda.

Dramatically she came to a standstill as her eyes fell on Matilda's visitors.

"*Juste ciel!*" she cried. "I might have guessed—I depart from Mademoiselle for a little minute—and what happens? *Mon Dieu*, couldn't you leave the poor thing alone for one evening?"

"Frederick sent us," volunteered Lady Caroline; an explanation which only further incensed Hortense.

"*Mais, si*, his Grace would: *fi donc*, I am ashamed of you all. You are indeed the worst children I have ever encountered." With a start of well-feigned astonishment she now seemed to become conscious of the presence of Lord George for the first time. "And there is Nurse Cross hunting for his little lordship here—but everywhere she hunts. And she is all red-faced and angry. And you 'ave hidden him with Mademoiselle who is a stranger and knows nothing of the rules in this 'ouse."

Flouncing past the children she placed her tray on the table at Matilda's elbow with a bang that made the knives and forks rattle again.

"And you very well know it is long past six and he ought to be in bed."

From his niche of fancied security Lord George most rashly, as it turned out, spoke.

"But I am not thleepy," he said.

It was an unfortunate utterance when silence in Hortense's opinion would better have become him; with a muttered word of apology to Matilda she swooped down on the child, tore him from his post of vantage, and with a quick "Mademoiselle permits?" bore him out of the room before the astonished little creature could utter a sound. The Ladies Caroline and Charlotte gazed after him aghast.

"That was quick work," said Matilda.

It was not till the culprit was well down the passage that he began to roar in lusty protest.

"Hortense is very strong," murmured Lady Caroline in a still, small voice.

And then, they, too, believing discretion to be the better part of valour, prepared to take their leave; a trifle more hurriedly than they had intended.

"But," said Lady Caroline, "before we go we want to ask you something. Promise you will say yes, Miss Horsey."

"Not before I know what it is," replied Matilda with a caution she had acquired at the Swallow's Nest.

Lady Caroline looked pained; it seemed as if this new ruler of the schoolroom was just the same as every other governess they had ever had and possessed the usual flatly mistrustful nature. However, as there looked to be no help for it: she at once plunged into the middle of her subject.

"Can we stay up later tonight please—because Frederick is home? Mama said we might, if you said—yes."

Anxiously both children awaited Matilda's reply, and it was with feelings of heartfelt relief, after a moment's consideration on her part, they received the required permission. At the door they turned.

"We like you," said Lady Caroline, "even if you have a funny name."

But Matilda hardly listened to this valedictory remark; for she had already started on her supper, as she was very hungry.

CHAPTER VI

SETS FORTH A DAY IN THE LIFE OF MATILDA AT TILNEY HOUSE

MATILDA'S first night under the august roof which was now to be her home was passed in a most refreshing and dreamless sleep. And she awakened the next morning to experience that rare but delightful feeling as of one who does not own a care in the world.

Cosily she lay in her fourpost bed and let her fancies rove, hither and yon: very butterflies of reflection over all the more agreeable happenings of the preceding day. And about one courteous stranger in particular she permitted her thoughts to linger, possibly more than was entirely befitting. But then, in extenuation, it must be urged that Matilda as we know was a romantic at heart: and the young man was undoubtedly good looking. She was busily engaged in speculating as to whether Fate would ever allow her path to cross his again—and privately much she hoped it might—when a knock at the door roused her from these idle fancies. "Come in, please," cried Matilda, sitting very upright in bed.

Upon which the door opened disclosing a pleasant-faced housemaid who, bearing in one hand a small, round tray on which reposed a cup of tea, and a thin slice of bread and butter on a flower-painted plate, and in the other a brass can of hot water, came up with these to Matilda's bedside and wished her a good morning.

"For me?" asked Matilda as the maid presented the tray to her.

"Yes, miss, unless you don't take it in the mornings."

Matilda smiled up at her rosy face, and held out her hand for the little tray.

"I love it," she confessed candidly. And took a bite at the bread and butter.

"It makes a good beginning to the day, I think," returned the maid as she deposited the can on the wash-hand-stand and went over to the windows to draw back the curtains and let in the morning light.

"It's a fine day, thank goodness," she announced cheerfully.

With great contentment Matilda was now sipping her tea; not so had she been spoiled at the Swallow's Nest.

"I am so glad the rain has stopped," she said, following with interest the filling of her hip bath with hot water and the proper disposal of bathtowel, soap, and sponge around it; then a thought struck her.

"What time is breakfast?" she asked.

"Breakfast is in the schoolroom at half past eight, miss," and with an amiable smile the Hebe, her work there efficiently done, vanished in a whirl of crisp pink skirts and white apron.

Her bread and butter finished and her teacup empty Matilda sprang out of bed, and, after making short work of her dressing, punctually to the moment named, walked briskly down the passage and for the first time into the ducal schoolroom—a well-worn apartment this.

Already the Ladies Caroline and Charlotte were there to greet her.

But of Lord George there was no trace.

Ceremoniously Matilda saluted her pupils and then enquired as to the whereabouts of their younger brother.

"George has all his meals with Nurse Cross and Baby," replied Lady Caroline, "you see he's only half out of the nursery."

"And a good thing, too," muttered Lady Charlotte, seating herself as near the toast rack as she could; for she

wined to more than a partiality for this article of consumption.

"Oh, why?" asked Matilda.

"He chatters so," returned Lady Charlotte uncompromisingly.

In which criticism she showed herself to be a true Briton and an upholder, young as she was, of the holy and hushed calm of the breakfast table. She was evidently no believer in mere idle conversation before the day was thoroughly aired. The late Duke her father had been much of the same mind also: to the, at first, open dismay of his Duchess who was of a sanguine disposition of a morning; particularly when the sun shone and the sky was blue.

Matilda laughed.

"But I like to chatter, myself," she said. "It's so much more amusing than being glum."

"And so do I," confessed Lady Caroline. "But Whiskers never wakes up in a good temper. It's her liver, Nurse Cross thinks."

Lady Charlotte regarded her twin morosely.

"I can't help my liver," she replied, "it was there when I was born. And polite people do not talk about their insides. I heard Hortense say so, the other day," she ended as she helped herself to the marmalade with a generosity of spirit that boded ill for anyone coming after.

Lady Caroline pushed away her empty porridge plate.

"Well, none of us are very polite," she said, "so what does it matter? Besides if you didn't have a liver you'd be dead."

This announcement cast a yet deeper gloom over Lady Charlotte's morning atmosphere.

"I do wish you wouldn't bother about my liver," she cried, "it's never interfered with you yet."

Lady Caroline looked at her for a moment.

"And I hope it never will," she returned piously.

"How could it?" asked Matilda.

But Lady Caroline shook her head.

"You never know with this family," she added.

And so pregnant with dark meaning was her tone that Matilda felt perhaps it was wiser to skate away from so delicate a topic rather than to pursue any further enquiry into the exact signification of so ambiguous a remark. To beg Lady Caroline to elucidate her assertion Matilda felt might hold an element of danger that would very well in the long run precipitate them all into an arena of party strife. So, although she would have been delighted to know exactly what Lady Caroline did mean, she left the riddle unsolved and changed the subject to enquire after the health and present pursuits of their elder brother Frederick Duke of Westmainham; conceiving this to be at least a less obscure and enigmatical topic for a spring morning.

"He's going out riding in the Row with Victoria this morning, I expect," replied Lady Caroline, "I wish I was."

"But we shall have to do lessons as usual," remarked Lady Charlotte sighing heavily.

And, Matilda assenting, the breakfast proceeded to its end in a meditative silence as far as the children were concerned. But there was to be a respite for them after all, it appeared. For almost as soon as the table had been cleared and Matilda was about to examine the somewhat battered scholastic aids to education on the bookcase shelves, Hortense arrived with a request that Miss Horsey would be good enough to go down to the small blue room at once as Her Grace wished to see her.

Obediently Matilda laid down the book she was holding and left the room with Hortense.

Now a first interview with one in authority is always a little alarming, even if only subconsciously so. So much may be hoped from it; and too often little actual encouragement found therein. And some such idea was running uppermost in Matilda's head as she tripped down the great empty staircase after Hortense: who, leaving her with a word of encouragement at the threshold of the Duchess's room, bade her present herself forthwith before the august

presence of her employer. A little timidly, therefore, she knocked on the door and upon receiving permission to enter walked into the room.

At a writing table at the far end the Duchess sat pen in hand, who perceiving that Matilda remained hesitating by the door, beckoned her to come closer. So, taking her courage with her, she went forward and dropped her school curtsey and her eyes together as she was greeted by her formidable Grace of Westmainham.

"And so," said the Duchess regarding the slight figure kindly enough, "you are Miss Horsey. And you have come to teach my little girls."

"If Your Grace pleases," said Matilda.

"You look very young, my dear."

The light, dry, almost quizzical tone in which the Duchess spoke caused Matilda to raise suddenly a pair of very apprehensive eyes; whilst startled, indeed, by the implied criticism as she conceived the statement her heart beat ever more and more fast.

And in her distress she clasped and unclasped her hands nervously.

"Yes, very young," repeated the Duchess.

Matilda sighed. Most obviously there was no argument she could advance to controvert the declaration. It was only too true: she was young—very young. And no one was more conscious of it than Matilda herself; added to which, at the moment unfortunately, she felt younger than ever—almost absurdly so. A little wildly she began to wonder what she could do about it; and whether wearing a cap like Miss Sara Ann's might age her at all, if it were trimmed with, possibly, either sage green or purple ribbons. But, surely, this youth which she could not help was not going to stand too much in her way. Time alone, she was quite aware, could remedy the fault; if fault it were. No amount of plain, dark dresses and ugly shoes could disguise her completely, she feared. Sadly she began to speculate, as the silence grew and the Duchess studied her

new preceptress thoughtfully, if after all she was not to find favour in those exalted eyes now bent on her, simply on this score of her lamentably youthful appearance. And devoutly Matilda wished she could have produced even one gray lock of hair; or, at least, some really respectable wrinkles. Dispiritedly she hung her head and her very ringlets drooped as she revolved in her mind the possibility of having to suffer an ignominious return to her former home; so exactly like the proverbial bad penny to which she had so often been likened by the Misses Nixon. Alarming prospect indeed, now that for over twenty-four hours she had tasted liberty and found it wholly exhilarating and delightful. And, further, since Fate for half an hour had seen fit to throw across her path that entirely too fascinating (seen in retrospect) young gentleman—but here alarmed at the audacity of her reflections Matilda trembled and dismissed hurriedly and fearfully the nascent dream. Young men—and such young men especially—so determined and sure of themselves could not be considered in any way by a well-bred young person anxious to do her duty, and the right thing, from sunrise to sunset. Too well Matilda realized this.

"Yes," said the Duchess at last, breaking the silence "you do look a perfect baby; not a day older than Victoria I declare."

There was such an air of finality about her that once more Matilda blushed deeply and hung her head.

Too young—too young.

That was to be her knell evidently.

"And my last governess was sixty, at least," added Her Grace inconsequently.

"Sixty," whispered Matilda with wide eyes.

Sixty—a great age; nay, a proper age.

With a heart of lead Matilda stood her ground and waited for the blow to fall: for sentence of banishment to be delivered.

And even more dismayed at the prospect, if that were

possible, supposed disconsolately that Mr. Francis when he learnt the disastrous news would expect her to return him at once those precious fifteen pounds now so safely reposing in the left corner of the top right-hand drawer of the tall boy in her room upstairs—as also the ten shillings at present in her pocket—with which he had endowed her only yesterday. More and more dejectedly Matilda hoped he might let her keep some poor remnant of the little fortune; although knowing his stern sense of probity the chances were against it. Alas and alack, then there would be no elegant fringe-trimmed sunshade for her; nor charming toy of a watch, neither. Bitter, bitter thought. Never would she be able to carry out the Misses Nixon's admonitions as to its nightly winding.

But the Duchess was speaking again; and her next few words, added to an unexpected geniality of manner, sent a happier colour back to the cheek of Matilda, and a brighter light to her eye.

"I hope you will not find them too troublesome; they are full of tricks."

So she was to stay.

Happy, happy moment.

A great wave of relief surged over her; and sure now that, if only Her Grace would be pleased to consider her equal to her duties, she could most courageously cope single-handed, and valiant, with any amount of tricks on the part of the Ladies Caroline and Charlotte, Matilda met their mother's considering gaze with a cheerful serenity that prepossessed not a little the Duchess in her favour.

"Yes, my dear, full of tricks and as mischievous as a cart-load of monkeys," nodded the Duchess with great vigour.

And then she laughed with much heartiness.

"I don't envy you—frankly, I don't."

Confidentially she leant towards Matilda and again nodded wisely.

"But I generally get on with children," replied Matilda who with each passing moment now found her spirits rising

as she discovered that her new pupils' parent was less and less terrifying.

Undoubtedly there was something very human and likeable about Adelaide, Duchess of Westmainham; although, at the same time, she presented to the eyes of the country-bred Matilda an almost overwhelming vision of aristocratic poise and fashion—wearing only the simplest of morning gowns though she was.

"Nerves strong?" suddenly demanded the Duchess.

"Oh, yes," said Matilda.

"Delighted to hear it," rapped out Her Grace; "you'll need 'em," whilst once more the quizzical note crept into her voice; and then she launched with startling abruptness another verbal thunderbolt at the unsuspecting Matilda.

"Can you teach, Miss Horsey? That is the next important question."

Through the quiet room the awful enquiry seemed to reverberate long after the Duchess had finished making it: destroying at one fell blow Matilda's lately completed and airy Spanish castle of hope and future endeavour. Ill-timed, it would seem, had been her optimistic constructional operations.

Could she teach?

Matilda found herself quite unable to decide this knotty point.

Frankly—now that the question had been put squarely to her without any possibility of compromise in her reply—she was inclined to state (without any more ado and no matter what the consequences) that the answer was in the negative.

But—never let it be admitted that a Briton acknowledges defeat easily. Rather let it be still noised abroad that they are from the eldest to the youngest Trojans still rather than—*fuimus Troes*. And so Matilda remembering that bent she might be without shame but broken she must not show herself, faltered out:

"Oh, think so— I hope so, Your Grace."

And fell silent once more.

"Well, my children are ignoramuses," observed their parent with cold decision. "Their history is ridiculous, their geography worse, and their arithmetic preposterous."

"Oh," breathed Matilda, greatly relieved to hear it.

And almost immediately, brick in hand, started rebuilding afresh on an even more considerable aërial scale than previously she had ventured to do. Especially, as does a drowning man catch at a straw, did she take courage and even pleasure in the knowledge that her pupils were not, amongst other things, arithmeticians in any sense of the word, however remote. Deeply moved Matilda returned eloquent if silent thanks for this mercy. For, as we already know, neither was she. Nor, she was to learn in after years, for the matter of that were most human beings. So this being the case she dared to hope that she and the Ladies Caroline and Charlotte might all row very comfortably in the same educational boat. With this expectation animating her she looked at the Duchess with more confidence.

"I am sure I can teach them simple arithmetic," she said.

That this modest avowal seemed to occasion Her Grace considerable amusement surprised Matilda not a little.

"It won't be simple if they can help it," chuckled their mother at last. "But I am sure you'll do your best."

"Indeed I will," cried Matilda.

"Well, then—" the Duchess considered, her eyes on the clock as one who has a busy day before her, "you will give them lessons from half past nine till noon each day. At noon you will take them for an hour's brisk walk in the Park. And you will not permit any loitering on any pretext, whatsoever: so make them understand this, please."

Matilda bent her head.

"The garden is for them to play in: the Park for exercise."

A sharp knock on the door at this moment interrupted her.

"Come in," cried the Duchess, and then she added, "Am

I never to have a moment's peace?"

It seemed not—for the door opening disclosed a young

lady of about Matilda's own age, clad in a riding habit: who, shutting the door very decidedly behind her, ran up the length of the room to the Duchess, throwing a careless glance at Matilda as she passed by.

"Now, what do you want, Victoria?" questioned Her Grace impatiently.

Lady Victoria shrugged her shoulders.

"You know as well as I do, Mama," she rejoined, "I've come for that stupid ring of mine as you told me to."

And she threw herself into an adjacent armchair, petulantly tapping at her boot with her riding whip.

The Duchess looked uncommonly annoyed.

"Your ring—" she began.

"If you've got it," thrust Lady Victoria, with a touch of malice that still further irritated her mother.

"Of course I have it," she said.

But she made no effort to restore the article of jewelry in question to its rightful, if capricious, owner.

"You must wait," she continued crisply. "I am talking to Miss Horsey now."

Lady Victoria made a face: and glanced across from her frowning mother to the silent Matilda.

"She looks a demure little puss," she remarked mischievously.

"Victoria!" cried the Duchess.

But her daughter only laughed and nodded at Matilda in the most unconcerned manner.

"Well, she does," she insisted. "And is Miss Horsey to chaperon me at my music lessons with Doctor Major, Mama? That will be quite amusing. I expect it will be a case of the blind leading the blind. And we know what happened. The ditch was their final resting place, eh, Miss Horsey? At least, as far as my memory serves me, it is so stated in Scripture."

But this flippancy met with no answering spark of appreciation from her mother. Coldly the Duchess turned her shoulder on her irrepressible daughter and resumed her

instructions to Matilda the while Lady Victoria yawned audibly.

"After lunch, Miss Horsey," she continued, "you will wait for orders. Some days I like the children to drive with me; and then there are their dancing lessons at Miss Geary's in Hanover Square. And now and then they go to tea with their little friends."

She paused for a moment then ended impressively in her deep contralto voice, "But at seven precisely they go to bed."

It was at this point that an uncontrollable and unseemly giggle broke from the impetuous Lady Victoria.

"You mean, Mama, they *start* going to bed," she corrected.

"I mean what I say," retorted the Duchess. "And then, Miss Horsey, you have the evening to yourself."

"What is left of it," murmured the incorrigible Victoria, *sotto voce*: and as seemed to be the singular custom of her family, her eye meeting Matilda's, she winked slowly and significantly.

In vain Matilda strove to repress an answering smile; but the Duchess did not intend to put up with so much ill-mannered interruption. For, drawing herself up to her full height and staring her daughter down, she observed:

"I'll trouble you to mind your own business, Victoria; or else you can leave the room."

"Not without my ring, Mama," most firmly returned that young lady.

But the Duchess was speaking again to Matilda and took no notice of her daughter's remark.

"You will have one afternoon a week to yourself, Miss Horsey: and your salary will be thirty-six pounds a year."

Thirty-six pounds a year—a noble sum.

And she already possessed fifteen. Could riches go further? Matilda rather fancied not. And, like Goldsmith's famous parson of Auburn—loveliest village of the plain—she felt herself passing rich even though her

stipend would lack of four golden sovereigns to the original clerical emolument. But thirty-six pounds of her very own—the world was fast taking on the aspect of a tremendous El Dorado to Matilda.

For the last time the Duchess's shrewd glance fell on the now composed little figure, so placidly standing before her with folded hands, her bright eyes alone betraying a mounting excitement. And these only when she raised them momentarily from her prolonged inspection of the carpet. But the Duchess caught a glint once; and it was on this gleam that she decided that the child had plenty of spirit for all her pretty primness. And that she was no premature little old woman. She wished, though, Victoria had as tranquil an air. Much good sense that little, smooth head contained, she dared swear.

"Mr. Francis seems to imagine you possess all the virtues," she said smilingly.

But Matilda shook her head.

"At school they thought me anything but perfect, Your Grace," she confessed.

"And I'm glad to hear it," observed the Duchess rising from her chair and bringing the interview to a close, "for if there is one thing I do detest more than another it is a young female prig."

"Oh," cried Matilda, "I don't think I should ever be that. I'm not serious-minded enough—and I do so enjoy things."

And so saying she dropped her little curtsey again.

"And so you should, child, at your age," returned the Duchess good-humouredly, with a valedictory wave of the hand.

Contented and relieved at so auspicious a termination to the momentous interview Matilda heard without heeding what the Duchess said to Lady Victoria as she tripped out of the long room.

"Here is your ring, miss, and if I am not mistaken Doodles is already entertaining——"

But the rest of the sentence was lost in Matilda's careful closing of the door.

Lightly she ascended the great staircase this time and re-entered the schoolroom. With a will she set to work on her new duties possibly a little hindered by the curious tactics of her pupils who seemed not to know where any book or primer was placed, whose ink supplies and pencils all seemed to have run out together with their brains; but, still fired with her new zeal Matilda struggled gallantly on: and the morning passed so rapidly in reviewing the field of battle that noon and her first walk—brisk you may be sure—with the Ladies Caroline and Charlotte found Matilda still in a most exalted state of mind and treading on insubstantial air rather than merely plain pavements of material stone. So great were her plans for future educational triumphs.

It was not till the shades of evening had well fallen and at last the children had after much persuasion betaken themselves to bed that Matilda, sitting before the fire in a low basket chair, writing paper and pen to her hand, brought her kite of fancy to earth once more and conscientiously embarked on the composition of her first long and explanatory letter to that eminent lawyer, Mr. Francis.

"My dear Mr. Francis," she began, "Much of an interesting nature has happened to me since the cab Mr. Wicks called drove me away from your door——"

Much, much indeed!

And across the flowing Italian hand and the smooth page fell a picture that caused Matilda's pen to remain poised in air, whilst she again looked into a pair of attractive, concerned eyes: and the sound of a drawling lazy voice again became audible to her ear.

Fanciful, dreaming Matilda.

CHAPTER VII

RELATES HOW MATILDA CAME ACROSS A CERTAIN YOUNG
GENTLEMAN AGAIN

MARCH, with its gusty, rain-swept hours was gone, and the early days of April had considerably enhanced the tender green of the leafage on the trees in the Park whither Matilda and her charges repaired for their ordered matutinal exercise on most fine days, when, just after Easter which fell early that year, on one never-to-be-forgotten afternoon of festival Matilda came fairly and squarely upon the new hero of all her dreaming moments.

And, too, when she had almost completely abandoned all hope of ever encountering that young sultan again.

So does Fate ever, from first to last, deal with poor humanity: unexpectedly and with strange twistings and shiftings unwinding the coil of life.

It had so happened that, all that morning during lessons, Matilda had been undecided as to how she should spend this particular holiday.

And whether she should favour the celebrated galleries of Madame Tussaud with a visit (properly chaperoned by the willing Hortense, who was bent on spending an hour or so there also) in order that she might view amongst other worthies the recently modelled waxwork of that hero of the Alma, Field Marshall Lord Raglan, whose manly beauty was then fluttering many a susceptible female heart, she could not make up her mind.

To weigh against this undoubtedly alluring programme there was another project; and one quite as exciting to Matilda.

Should she, or should she not, greatly venturous, sally forth unescorted to search for that remarkable watch she so longed to possess: and which she felt certain was waiting for her, and her only, in some at present unvisited emporium?

Over and over again Matilda debated the merits of each scheme; and in so doing found herself considerably, if at the same time pleasurable, agitated.

How to extract the greatest amount of happiness out of her holiday hours was a problem indeed.

So much so that the agreeable arguments for and against each course started up at last in the very text itself of PLEASANT PAGES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE (that most instructive collection of Moral Tales on Love, Truth, Honesty and Industry, in six volumes, price one guinea) out of which it was her daily duty to read aloud, clearly and distinctly, for the edification of the invariably bored Ladies Caroline and Charlotte, whose tastes in literature were of a more robust nature, for exactly twenty minutes after their early and plain dinner was finished. Whilst they, most mutinously carrying out the precept which lays it down as an axiom that after dinner one should "sit a while," at the same time sewed on certain lengths of thick calico; endeavouring, somewhat eccentrically as to method, to fashion these into the semblance of petticoats for the indigent. And breaking altogether too many needles in the process.

"Though who could want to wear these ugly things?" always wailed the Lady Charlotte on recommencing her daily more and more detested task.

But finally (after having, truth to tell, had recourse to the spinning of a coin in order to come to a decision) on this particular and lovely spring day—mild and balmy—such a day as does sometimes delight and charm poor mortals between weeks of drizzle and cold winds—Matilda found herself at last in the gay precincts of Hyde Park alone: and bent on her fascinating quest of watch hunting as soon as she had taken a delicious and almost stolen turn

within its iron gates in order that she might the better at her leisure inhale an air that was full of a thousand growing scents of flowers and young burgeoning blooms. For Matilda with her country up-bringing Hyde Park as well as the more secluded Kensington Gardens ever held an enduring and incalculable fascination that would not be denied: whether in its wider wind swept and grassy spaces, or its more elegant and formal flower bordered walks.

And, her little nose more tip-tilted than ever, she was sniffing the breeze most rapturously and fairly dancing along the gravelled path that bordered the Row with a lively abandon that caused more than one male eye to cast an appreciative look at her, when—the amazing *rencontre* took place. And all the world grew roseate in a second.

It needed then, or indeed at any time, very little to make Matilda content with life. She loved existence fairly for its own sake. And, like the poet's young Duchess of Italy, a flower, a greeting, a smile, could transform her world in a twinkling of an eye. Of her it could have been as truthfully said, "that she liked what e'er she looked on."

To the young man cantering moodily enough in the Row, immaculately turned out as to garments and as wonderfully mounted on his bold, raking chestnut, but, nevertheless and notwithstanding, a prey to gloomily introspective thought, Matilda burst as a completely unlooked-for but none the less wholly radiant vision.

And to his own astonishment he found his pulse beating with a decidedly more rapid action added to a quite marked and eager feeling of satisfaction at this unexpected opportunity to renew an acquaintance he had earlier decided must be put behind him entirely, situated as he was, on the score of its complete unwisdom. But this thought born of prudence and worldly knowledge had flown far from his mind and had disappeared into the limbo of forgotten resolutions as he reined in his mount from a canter to a sedate walk and sat contemplating the swift approach of Matilda.

Her curls a little ruffled by the breeze, her cheeks flushed with exercise, she presented a delectable picture for any young man's eye.

He was relieved to observe that today she was wearing a most becoming fur-trimmed jacket and a coquettish little hat decorated with a curling feather—of Hortense's deft designing—and no longer the dowdy garments of their first meeting.

A little to his surprise, as far as he could see, she was quite alone.

Well, at any rate, that meant there was no elderly dragon at hand to pounce on her and hale her off before he could do more than pass the time of day and enquire in suitable terms of ceremony as to her health—which looked, as far as he could judge from the distance, promising.

And his eyes bent on her thoughtfully he found himself wondering who or what she could be.

But by this time she was so close at hand that he deemed it advisable to turn his horse on the tan bark and cross cautiously to that side of the railings which she must needs reach in the next moment or so.

And there, his face turned towards her, his hand on his horse's flank, he remained eagerly watching her—and waiting.

Matilda, her thoughts a thousand miles away from him for once, came abreast of him—did not even look his way—and was passing, actually most inexorably disappearing, out of his life once more e'er she knew she had well come to it, before he called to her.

"Hullo!" he cried, "you are never going to cut me, are you? And after, although I hate to remind you of it, I got you out of that cab——"

Startled, Matilda turned her head.

"That would be too unkind," he rattled on. "Especially when I have been wanting to see you again so much."

Matilda halted.

"Why it's—," she began and then her voice suddenly failed her, to her great confusion of spirit.

"Yes, it's me."

"I—" murmured Matilda, "Me—I——"

The greeting was so quaintly characteristic of her that the young man burst out laughing, his late moodiness entirely flown: and leaning over his horse's mane he held out his hand, observing gaily:

"Never mind about my parts of speech; I left school so long ago that I'm sure I've forgotten all I ever knew."

"Which seems a pity," said Matilda.

"I am it—or he—whichever you prefer. And I'm very glad to see you."

His look held so much of real pleasure that "So am I," admitted Matilda, and stepping up to the railing she took her right hand out of her muff and placed it in his.

"What have you been doing with yourself?" was his next question.

Matilda considered.

"I have been very busy," she finally declared.

"Ah," said he, "it suits you to be busy."

Matilda shot a look at him.

"Work is a most excellent tonic for all of us," she rejoined with a demure air that set him off again, and she gently disengaged her hand from his firm clasp as she spoke.

With obvious and unrepentant reluctance which did not go entirely unremarked by Matilda he released it.

"Upon my word," he remonstrated, "you're in a deuce of a hurry. But you're not going to slip away so easily this time."

Confronted by so much determination Matilda found herself retreating involuntarily a step or two; and to hide the growing turmoil of her feelings patted the satin neck of his steed.

"This is a beautiful beast," she said. "No, you have the advantage of me on this occasion, I suppose; you have a horse, you see."

"So I have, Miss Matilda Hope," he rejoined mischievously. "You perceive I haven't forgotten your name."

Matilda professed herself very honoured.

"Nor have I forgotten yours, Mr. Christopher Morris," she flashed back.

"And that is almost more than I dared to hope," he returned with exceeding gravity of demeanour, although somewhere in the background a twinkle of amusement still lingered. And then, lowering his voice and glancing round to be sure that he was not overheard by the passers-by, he asked, "Did they scold you when you reached your journey's end that day?"

Matilda shook her head, remembering the complete and devastating indifference with which her arrival at Tilney House had been greeted. In retrospect, now that she was used to everything and very much at home with its household generally, she could afford to smile at it.

"No," said she very truthfully, "you see no one was actually expecting me."

Astonished at this assertion made so calmly by her he stared at her.

"You don't mean it!" he cried. "Why, what a singular household yours must be."

But this Matilda would not allow.

"They are all delightful people," she explained firmly.

"But not to care whether you arrived, or not."

"It wasn't exactly that—" Matilda rejoined; but as she did not seem wishful to pursue the subject any further the young man let it drop to enquire half eagerly, half carelessly, in which direction she was walking: gathering up the reins on his horse's neck as he did so.

Matilda dimpled, she could not help it, so almost epoch-making did she feel the information she was about to impart to be.

"I am going," she announced with an enchanting little air of importance, "to buy myself a watch."

"Not possible," said the young man falling at once, al-

though unnoticed by her, into her holiday mood, "what a splendid occasion, if I may say so. Is it your first watch?"

"My very first," nodded Matilda. "I have often promised myself one. And now, at last," and she sighed for very content, "I am going to buy it."

"Terrific," said he gaily. "I remember perfectly how excited I was over my first watch; I couldn't sleep a wink for nights beforehand. But surely," he continued in mock disapproval, and from a freakish desire to see what she would say to his criticism, "you are not going shopping without a maid."

For Matilda this was a sad douche of cold water indeed; and for a moment she looked quite as downcast as even Miss Sara Ann Nixon could have wished to see her in what she would have considered so dubious a situation.

"I'm afraid so," she confessed. "I have you see no maid of my own. And Hortense who is very kind to me, preferred to go to Madame Tussaud's today; she thought it more educational. But I simply couldn't wait any longer. Do you think it very wrong?"

Wistfully her look sought his; and rapidly, Mr. Christopher Morris, a little dashed that Matilda should have taken his raillery so literally, hastened to reassure her.

"Certainly not," he cried, "and all your reasons are most excellent ones. But where are you going to buy this remarkable—for I am sure it will be that—timepiece?"

However Matilda was not to be so easily comforted or set at ease; for, all unknowingly though it was, he had roused and to some purpose her apprehension: and she hesitated before answering his question, glancing timidly away over the animated groups already beginning to ride up and down in the early afternoon sunshine to where beyond the Row itself a steady stream of barouches, carriages, and phaëtons, was entering, in ever increasing numbers, the Park gates by Apsley House.

Fearfully she began to ask herself if she had done well to venture all alone into this centre of beauty and fashion?

For she knew from Hortense, who had endowed her with much useful knowledge concerning the habits and pursuits of leisured London society during the Season, that at any moment the Westmainham liveries might very easily loom up on the horizon. And then her quite harmless meeting with this young man might be very much misconstrued: and with tragic results to her it was more than likely.

Deeply she sighed as she decided that this interview, pleasant though it was, must not be prolonged.

"Where did you intend buying this watch?" he repeated.

"I did think of a jeweller's shop in Bond Street," returned Matilda absently; and now seeking a conversational opening wherein she could without fear of being considered discourteous take her leave.

"The very place," he returned, "now do let me help you choose it," he begged eagerly.

But this was a most inauspicious moment to select in which to make such a daring suggestion; and one indiscreet to the point of rashness, as Matilda felt it to be.

"I have nothing on earth to do this afternoon—at least nothing that matters."

"Oh, no, no, I couldn't," said Matilda hurriedly.

"Not when I have such an eye for a good watch?" he begged.

But even this only drew from Matilda another decided shake of the head.

"Although," she confessed, "I know so little about watches that I'm a wee bit afraid of choosing the wrong one."

"There," said he triumphantly, "you see you have no excuse for shunting me. Let's go at once."

But Matilda could not see her way to doing this.

"No, indeed," she rejoined with a firmness that did her credit.

And then touched by his open disappointment she added:

"But I thank you a thousand times: and believe me I

am very regretful that I cannot avail myself of your generous offer and your kind services!"

But to this handsome acknowledgment all he said with, as Matilda considered marked rudeness, was "Pooh."

And then——

"Why not? I consider your scruples to be absurd."

This arrant piece of effrontery was too much for Matilda. who, amazed at such audacity on his part, drew herself up to her full height—five feet two inches and a little over for she stood on the very tips of her toes—and prepared to administer with spirit, and indeed *con amore*, the reproof that he so amply, in her opinion, merited.

"You must be very well aware that it would not be at all the thing for me to permit you to accompany me, sir," she declared with a freezing hauteur that secretly fascinated the culprit she arraigned.

"I cannot admit that," he rejoined quite unabashed, "in fact there is every reason——"

"There," retorted Matilda, "I disagree with you entirely."

And she continued to reproduce as well as she was able Her Grace of Westmainham's cold stare of surprise and disapproval when annoyed, to the continued amusement of Mr. Christopher.

For, reflected Matilda, luckily unaware of the admiration her vis-à-vis was feeling for her, such presumption as he had shown should be checked and with a firm hand.

She was aroused from her idle dream of domination by his voice saying, "You don't know how funny you look when you frown like that."

"Sir!" cried the outraged Matilda at this fresh proof of insolence; and now bitterly recognizing that her glacial air had had no effect on him whatsoever.

But undeterred apparently by anything she might say he continued, carrying yet further the onslaught into the foe's territory.

"I do think that you are perfectly horrid."

"Me?" asked Matilda, now absolutely bewildered at the rapidity with which he seemed to have turned the tables on her. "Me?"

"Yes, you—Miss Matilda."

Matilda gasped. "But I'm not, indeed," she answered in much distress.

"And after pulling you out of that absurd cab, too," he continued severely, "Why, but for me you might be there still."

But if he designed to play upon her sympathies, here he little overshot his mark; for to Matilda's mind—always practical when least expected by those about her—the statement merely appeared ridiculous.

"Oh, no," said she, "someone must have rescued me sooner or later; because the police could not have permitted such an obstruction as an overturned cab—and not even aansom neither—to block up the roadway too long."

"Oh, shame," said he, "I see you have no heart."

But this accusation went too far altogether; and could not be borne by any young lady of spirit. So Matilda held out her hand.

"You are quite mistaken," she replied. "Good-bye."

Alas, it had turned out that unwarily she had given him another advantage and one he was not slow to make use

For, retaining her little paw, he clasped it firmly vowing most exaggerated terms that he would not let her go till he treated him with less cruelty.

"Nonsense," said Matilda, divided between laughter and anger at his absurd attitude—theatrical in the extreme Miss Anna would have said; and with truth—"you are behaving very badly, just like a little boy I know and he is only six. You cannot expect me to admire you or approve of you. Besides," she added a shade inconsequently perhaps, "we've never been properly introduced."

"That can and shall be remedied," he declared. "But you must admit we've had tea together."

"I never really meant to," murmured Matilda.

"And will again," he asserted. "Come, I will not be snubbed on this lovely afternoon."

Matilda returned his merry look with one of unsmiling gravity.

"I should think," she said, "on any afternoon it would be difficult to snub you. Besides I wasn't trying to."

"Then," he rejoined, "be sensible and let me help you choose your watch."

"No," said Matilda, "I can't do that; and be so good as to give me back my hand. You are behaving very ridiculously, you know."

"I can't help that," he retorted. "Oh, very well," and he dropped Matilda's hand as though it were a red-hot coal. "Oh, very well, Miss Matilda Hope, have it your own way. I shan't ask you again. But there could have been nothing improper in my walking my horse as far as the Park gates yonder—on the road, mark you—on the road: whilst you paced as sedately as you pleased on the path——"

He paused rhetorically—for Matilda to make a comment, it seemed.

"No—perhaps not," she admitted. But her tone was extremely doubtful.

"I needn't even have addressed you—if you preferred it so——"

His sulky air roused Matilda and her air grew mischievous.

"I should much have preferred it so," she breathed.

Quickly he caught her up.

"What harm then, if in Bond Street I had met you—by chance?" he continued. "One might meet anyone so."

"Yes, indeed," said Matilda, "but after all I had decided not to go to Bond Street."

And openly she laughed at him.

"Oh, damn," said he. "And I thought you an amiable female."

"Fie for shame," rebuked Matilda, in her best school-

room manner, "to swear before a female, whether amiable or not, is not at all *comme il faut* I am sure."

But he was not listening.

"By George, I have a better idea," he cried suddenly.

And in his elation he brought his riding crop sharply down on his horse's flank, causing the startled animal to plunge wildly: and for some moments Matilda's young man had his hands full.

"There," Matilda could not help observing, when flushed and laughing he had brought the beast back to the railings, "you had much better continue your ride."

"Not yet," he rejoined. "Do me a favour, please. Wait for me here for ten minutes—no more—only let me get rid of Hector. And then I have a splendid plan—one that even you will agree to, I'm certain."

"But I can't wait here," objected Matilda, "I've wasted too much time already, as it is."

"Not on this wonderful afternoon: why you ought to be out in the air for your health's sake: everybody ought to be out in the air."

"I am in the air," Matilda pointed out, "and so is your plan I'm afraid. Good-bye—it's been delightful seeing you again—Mr. Christopher."

And with a little inclination of her head she turned away and resumed her walk.

But she was not, as he had told her at the beginning of their conversation, to be allowed to depart with such ease: for in another moment he was walking his horse alongside of her.

"I never thought you could be such a little pig," he said reproachfully.

Hardly willing to credit her ears Matilda faced about, her cheeks flaming: every martial instinct in her aroused.

"Did you say 'a pig' or 'a prig'?" she demanded.

"As well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb," runs the saying.

"Both—or either," he replied nonchalantly, meeting Matilda's cold look without a sign of contrition on his handsome features.

"I suppose you know," she said, "that you are quite spoiling my afternoon."

"I don't want to spoil it—I want to improve it. Why won't you let me help you buy a watch?"

His continual reiteration of the one question somehow reminded Matilda very much of Lord George; and it was in much the same tone that she employed to restrain that young child's over exuberant fancies that she replied to the cavalier at her side.

"Because it is not at all the thing to do," she patiently explained for about the third time.

"Bosh! There's nothing to cavil at in buying a mere watch," he rejoined with spirit, and then added as an afterthought, "if you have enough with which to pay the bill."

Matilda's head went up at this slur cast on her credit.

"Of course I have enough money," she declared impatiently. "I have no less than four pounds with me in my purse. But I am not going to argue with you——"

Coldly she faced him to issue her ultimatum.

"I am going to continue my walk to the Serpentine at once—so I will say good-bye; and please don't attempt to detain me, sir. And then I am going to buy my watch—alone. And I wish," she ended in quite a little whirlwind of annoyance and agitation, "that I had never told you anything about it."

This fiery outburst appeared to stun him into an astonished silence; thoughtfully he contemplated Matilda's flushed and downcast face for a moment and then, without another word, he raised his hat, bowed unsmilingly to her, set spurs to his horse and galloped away. Leaving behind him it must be admitted a singularly petrified young lady. For little had Matilda dreamed he would so take her words to heart, or that she would gain her point finally with such extreme swiftness.

But gone, he was: no doubt of it. And with dramatic abruptness.

More than a little taken aback at the turn of events Matilda turned on her heel and left the empty railing to resume her peregrinations.

But somehow, quite unaccountably, all the sparkle and gaiety had faded out of the scene. The very air itself was now less full of sunshine: and the trees looked to her no longer so delicately green and fairylike as they had done only so short a time before.

Slowly and very pensively, leaving the animated arena of the Row behind her, she crossed the grass and pacing sedately enough now went towards the glittering expanse of ornamental water which she had, on the instant and more to rid herself of her too persistent cavalier than because she really wished to make it so, declared to be her next objective in her afternoon's outing. That the success of her manoeuvre was immediate and that she was in consequence proceeding under flying colours, as it were, did not afford Matilda as much content, however, as might have been anticipated.

But to have the upper hand is not always to be completely victorious: and some triumphs there are, as all good generals know, more costly than defeats.

And so, fallen from the clouds indeed, her mood entirely changed from its earlier joyful anticipation, Matilda at this moment hardly cared whether she actually bought her long-coveted watch or not in the next couple of hours. And as to one point she was quite certain—now she would never dare venture to Bond Street for it without the chaperonage of Hortense. Therefore quite uncertain as to what she should do next—at the water's edge she came to a disconsolate halt.

"Oh, dear," she considered, "how difficult it is to be discreet and not upset people. I was only doing my duty, too. And he went without even saying good-bye. That was not very civil."

More and more tardy grew her step as she resumed her walk: and more and more did she distress her little head over the late encounter.

Could she have been too stark in her views—too harsh and peremptory after all?

“Yes, he’s quite spoilt my day,” she decided at length, unaware that she had in her profound dejection of soul uttered the remark out loud.

“Too bad!” returned a voice at her elbow.

Matilda swung round.

“Yes, it’s me again—I—and you,” he announced with mock gravity.

Dismayed, relieved, fluttered, her spirits soaring before she well knew what had happened to giddy altitudes indeed, her young heart doing some particularly fine racing action, Matilda surveyed the incorrigible creature.

“I am routed,” said he, “defeated and overcome—vanquished and subjugated—baffled, unhinged and unhorsed—and being now merely the sport of Fortune, I have come to throw myself upon your mercy, Miss Matilda Hope. For you quite destroyed my afternoon with your harshness.”

“Oh,” said Matilda, unsuccessfully endeavouring to visualize him in all these effectively dismal parts. “Oh, what a fright you gave me—and you spoilt my afternoon too, let me tell you.”

“Then we’re quits,” said he.

“And what have you done with your horse?” she demanded.

For that he was now horseless was the only accurate statement he had made she felt sure, so far.

“Left him at the Barracks,” he returned promptly, “he was confoundedly in the way. And, if you’ll overlook my riding togs, which I had not time to change for fear of missing you, I’m entirely at your service. So take pity on a poor wretch.”

And as brazen as ever, there in the path before her he made her a deep and ceremonious bow.

As we know too well—*quo Fata vocant*.

So Matilda sending one look round the horizon—bare and empty of sail—struck her flag and capitulated. And in so doing might have with a great deal more truth retorted on her late adversary that she was overpowered—dished—undone—circumvented and routed, rather than he, had she thought of it.

It is true that when she came to review the subsequent events of the afternoon in the safe privacy of her own bedroom late that night she was startled, sitting up in bed (the night-light flickering in its distant soap-dish, and her new watch ticking away in its worked wall-pocket beside her) to realize how lightly and easily at the last she had given in.

Startled—Matilda asked herself:

Could it have been that she was wishful to keep him by her side?

Hastily she shut out the disturbing thought. But, argue the affair as she might, reviewed in the calm silence of the night watches it certainly looked as though she, at least, lacked strength of character—an humbling reflection.

Unless, perhaps, this Mr. Christopher was one of those imperious natures born to rule; of which her history books were so full. Conquerors and buccaneers of all sorts and descriptions. Like—and at once the arrogant examples leapt to Matilda's trained mind—Oliver Cromwell or Jack Shepherd. Especially this last worthy. For the more she considered it the more she perceived a striking resemblance in Mr. Christopher's behaviour to the style, flamboyant and prodigious, of that long-dead highwayman. And in that case she was not to blame. These men of destiny always had their own way—at first.

At any rate at the moment it had certainly been the most natural thing in the world to the naturally docile Matilda to give in to his calm assumption of dominion.

Matilda honestly admitted as much.

And if, after all is said and done, the entire secret of

the Roman success as history bade her note lay in that nation's quality of persistence, probably Mr. Christopher even when a schoolboy had taken the lesson to heart—and found it work.

For before she well realized what was going forward Matilda had found herself whisked out of the Park at a great rate and into a hansom, from behind the wooden apron of which she was now to observe the world, whilst she and her dictatorial companion were rapidly bowled along the high road to the royal suburb of Kensington.

Looking down at her from his superior and manly height he made his announcement quite in the imperial manner.

"I am taking you," he told her—no with or by your leave about it—"to just the very place where we shall find exactly what you want, made by a most wonderful man. Bond Street isn't in it with him."

Matilda's murmur of thanks was almost lost in the noise of the surrounding traffic. And with that reaction that so often succeeds to a mood of exaltation she now became extremely and shyly silent: and disinclined to converse on any subject, much to the secret amusement of that bold pirate Mr. Christopher.

Swiftly the spanking grey took its way, and Matilda, into a part of town that was entirely unfamiliar to her. And absently she assented to every remark of her companion along the road, till that almost irrepressible young man for once gave conversation up as a bad job and, too, fell silent in his turn under her steady flow of monosyllables.

Somewhere near the old red-brick palace from which, not twenty years previously, another girl just as young and inexperienced as Matilda herself had been called in the grey dawn to rule England, he stopped the cab. And, helping Matilda most punctiliously to alight, informed her that they would do the rest of their journey on foot—their destination now being quite close.

"But where are you taking me to?" asked Matilda, as tucking her arm in his he hurried her along.

For indeed Matilda found herself hard put to it to keep up with his long strides continually jostled as she was by the pedestrians that filled the narrow pavements of the Kensington High Street. Or run into by persons emerging unexpectedly up steps out of the most old-fashioned shops imaginable: shops endowed, too, with low, bowed windows that hid more than displayed the goods they contained; or just as she was making as she thought, good progress, almost knocked off her feet by other people who hurried down steep, iron-railed steps out of equally old-world houses. Whilst overhead there resounded in her startled ears a continual clash and clangour of church bells.

"Where are you going?" she repeated breathlessly.

"You will see—all in good time," was his only reply.

And determinedly he plunged on.

But, when Matilda's breath was fast giving out, almost opposite the Parish Church of Saint Mary Abbott's (though Matilda did not know the name of it then) he halted, looked down at her, smiled reassuringly, and diving with her into a narrow cobbled alley out of all the noise and bustle, led her more slowly across a sun-lit, flower-bordered, stone-paved courtyard, and entered down three steps the most singular little dwelling, half workshop, half parlour, it had ever been her lot to see.

"*Voilà*," he cried triumphantly, "this is the residence and also studio of my very good friend, Monsieur Le Cheminant, maker of clocks, watches, and trinkets of all kinds."

Still a trifle ruffled and out of breath after her strenuous walk, Matilda's eyes now encountered, for the first time, the twinkling shrewd look of the black-bearded occupant of a littered working bench standing in the light of the window; overlooking the courtyard through which she had just come.

At the moment a grey parrot was perched on his shoulder; and this bird on seeing the newcomers cried impudently, "Go away, go away, naughty children. What are you doing here?"

So apposite was the question that Matilda burst out

laughing; she could not help it. And the clockmaker rising enquiringly from his bench smiled too.

"Ah, *tais-toi*, Riquette," he admonished the bird, and pulling him gently down from his shoulder set him on the top of his cage which stood on a low table close by. This done he came forward most courteously to greet Matilda and her escort.

"*Bon jour*, Mademoiselle," he began and then broke off on recognizing the young man standing just behind Matilda.

"Ah, *c'est toi, enfin*," he cried in a deep bass rumble, "what lucky chance brings you here today, my dear friend? It is a long time since you have honoured me with a visit."

Mr. Christopher shook warmly the hand he extended.

"Mine has been the loss, as you well know, Raoul," he replied. "But—" he hesitated and then added in a lower tone, "I had affairs——"

And he shrugged his shoulders.

"Thy godfather?"

The clockmaker's eyes twinkled more than ever and he tugged pensively at his beard.

"We know what heavy parents and such like are, too well, eh, Riquette?" To which question the parrot clambering up and down the outside of his cage screamed hoarsely, "No confidences, Mister." And then fell silent once more; merely regarding the world in general with a beady and mistrustful eye.

By this time Mr. Christopher and the clockmaker had piloted Matilda past a litter of odd bits of old furniture, including several great clocks on a long trestle (all going at different times in the most confusing way) up to a narrow, glass-topped counter.

This piece of furniture Matilda noticed was placed directly in front of a high and very much ornamented cabinet at the extreme end of the room, close to an open window. And this window overlooked a tiny garden gay with spring flowers.

"But now," explained Mr. Christopher, "I have brought you a client, *mon cher*, who is more than anxious to purchase one of your celebrated watches. And who must be shown the prettiest ones in your collection."

He laid so much emphasis on the last words of his sentence that the clockmaker regarding Matilda reflectively made her a slight bow.

"I shall be charmed to show Mademoiselle all that the studio affords of chic and charming," he declared.

Whereupon Matilda dropping him her quaint school courtsey he bowed again gravely before he turned to unlock the doors of his cabinet.

Mr. Christopher all this time had been leaning indolently against the counter, his eyes on Matilda.

"And above all things, Raoul, she can pay," he observed wickedly with a sidelong glance at the effect of his words on the clockmaker, "as much as four pounds—which is more than many of us can do."

"*Tiens*," returned Monsieur Le Cheminant with unimpaired gravity, as he laid as many as three full trays of shining watches before Matilda, one after the other.

"We must look to it," he added, "that Mademoiselle becomes the owner of a watch that is at once worthy of her, and of such a noble sum of money."

Matilda was extremely relieved to hear him say this; for privately, now that she was face to face with the splendid and glittering array on the counter, she was beginning to fear an altogether greater sum than four pounds might be needed with which to pay for even the least of these marvels of construction and beauty.

"I knew you would understand," said Mr. Christopher gently, "the importance of this unique occasion to Mademoiselle. Figure to yourself, *mon vieux*, that this is her first watch."

And the eyes of both men met over Matilda's feathered hat in an unspoken question and answer.

"Mademoiselle has the desire to possess a watch of gold, or of silver?" questioned Monsieur Le Cheminant.

And at this momentous inquiry Matilda tore herself away from the too incredible and fascinating display on the velvet trays before her.

"A gold watch," she replied with a ghost of a sigh, "is what I have always dreamed of. But perhaps that would be beyond my means, sir?"

Tremblingly she waited for him to pronounce sentence: for her heart was set on the gold timepieces. But in words Monsieur Le Cheminant did not reply.

Instead his, to Matilda, entirely unforeseen answer was to remove with decisive swiftness, and immediately, that tray which contained the less valuable examples of his stock well out of sight; and to set yet another receptacle completely filled with the more expensive models on the counter at her elbow. This action of his having been entirely beyond Matilda's expectations she remained staring at the array before her, hardly able to credit the plain evidences of her senses.

"Can it be gold—for four pounds?" she whispered, so difficult did she find it to adjust her ideas to the new position of affairs.

"It can—evidently," returned Mr. Christopher, with a matter of fact briskness in his manner that did much to reassure Matilda.

Accordingly, therefore, she resumed her fascinated and intent scrutiny of the works of art before her; whilst the watchmaker, now humming a contemplative tune in a cheerful and booming bass voice, bent over his trays considerably.

Intently he, too, reviewed the shining array; and at last breaking off his recitative said——

"Here I have a charming little watch of gold, Mademoiselle. A perfect specimen for a young lady's use. See, it has on the back a dark blue enamel ribbon twined round a shield for decoration—*chose très simple et fine*—on which

Mademoiselle can have her initials engraved if she so desire. The whole concern is a toy of a remarkable elegance, I can assure her."

At the same time he held out the dainty contraption to Matilda, who received it from him with a care that almost amounted to reverence. For never in her wildest dreams had she hoped to possess anything so utterly beautiful as this faultless example of the watchmaker's art, now ticking away in her hand. Slowly she turned it over and held it to the light—regarding it from all aspects.

"Ah," she murmured at last, "it is more lovely than anything I ever imagined."

"It pleases you, then?" asked Monsieur Le Cheminant.

Matilda nodded: she could not trust herself to speak.

"Then you must certainly have it," interjected Mr. Christopher with decision. "What is the price, Raoul?"

Still as a mouse and a prey to the liveliest anxiety Matilda waited to hear what answer to this second momentous question he would make.

"It is four pounds—," said Monsieur Le Cheminant firmly, his face absolutely expressionless as he watched the effect of his words on Matilda.

Her last lurking misgivings set at rest by his resolute tone Matilda laid the watch down and clasped her hands in her relief and satisfaction.

"Four pounds?" she repeated, hardly able to credit her good fortune even then.

"Four golden sovereigns, Mademoiselle, if you please," returned Monsieur Le Cheminant as deliberately as before.

"And I have four pounds and ten shillings in my purse," announced Matilda; her eyes shining like stars from the intoxication of it all. "Oh, please Monsieur, then I will have the darling little watch."

And turning her radiant face to the young man leaning so carelessly against the counter by her side, although he was obviously paying a certain amount of amused attention to her and her careful deliberations, she cried im-

pulsively, "How can I ever thank you sufficiently for your kindness in bringing me here?"

"No need," he laughed. "In my case virtue has decidedly been its own very ample reward. I am more than repaid in having made you so happy, Miss Matilda."

"But I am none the less very much in your debt, sir," persisted Matilda.

"And some day you shall pay me then," he retorted lightly.

But this remark made no impression on Matilda as she turned her attention once more to the alert and smiling watchmaker.

"May I take it away with me?" she asked eagerly.

"But certainly," replied Monsieur Le Cheminant. "Unless of course you wish your initials engraved on the case," he added.

However, so much delay as this must needs involve Matilda was not minded to consent to at all. Busily engaged as she was then in removing the four sovereigns from her almost too secure hiding place in the inmost recesses of her reticule she yet found energy enough to shake her head very decidedly.

"Oh, not this afternoon," she answered him, "because I must take the little watch home with me to show Hortense. She was so interested in my getting it, you see."

"And so you shall then; and Mademoiselle Hortense shall pronounce judgment on it as soon as may be," returned Monsieur Le Cheminant heartily as Matilda handed him the four historic coins in payment for her new treasure. Coins which he clinked perfunctorily together before throwing them into a little till as if they were objects of the most complete unimportance.

He then applied himself with great attention to winding up the watch with most intent care: after which he gave it a final and ceremonial polish, inserted it in a small chamois leather bag, as also the key in its own wrapping of tissue paper, and last of all laid the whole paraphernalia in a

dark blue leather case. This case again he wrapped in divers layers of paper red, white and blue; and then sealing the outermost covering of stout wrapping paper over it all with red wax, he at last handed the magical packet to Matilda herself, with a low bow.

"*Vive la France!*" he cried. "And may this bring Made-moiselle much happiness and excellent fortune."

Low curtsied Matilda in pretty acknowledgment of his good wishes, her precious package clasped tightly to her.

"I cannot express how much I feel myself to be in Monsieur's debt—," she began: but any further expression of gratitude was destined to remain unspoken.

For, in the gathering dusk (which had crept over them all unnoticed, so deeply had they been concentrated on Matilda's choice of a watch, and so unheedfully had the time slipped by) there now resounded the tread outside of a new group of customers for the watchmaker across the pavement of the secluded little courtyard; late though the hour was.

And Matilda glancing up at her companion to suggest that now she must be on her way again was startled to see that these new voices smote most unpleasantly on his ear. Gone was his air of nonchalance completely and he appeared at once unexpectedly attentive to the advent of these strangers, and uneasy at it, too.

Like a flash it crossed Matilda's mind that these people must be known to him.

Increasingly, therefore, dismayed at this unlooked for *contretemps*, Matilda, all her timidity and diffidence uppermost, moved away a few paces into the shadows which were fast filling the place; ready to take flight at the first opportunity.

To all outward appearance unconscious of the change in the atmosphere Monsieur Le Cheminant busied himself in replacing his trays on their shelves in the cabinet behind him.

"By gad," cried Mr. Christopher striding to the window

and peering out cautiously, "if it isn't that old harridan Harriet herself, and that smug son of hers, and that indefatigable gossip Sarah. Could anything fall out more annoyingly? What on earth made them come here today?"

Ominous tidings for Matilda indeed.

Disconcerted if ever a young man was by these apparitions (who seemed, so suddenly had they arrived, almost to have dropped from the clouds) he remained in the window embrasure staring out with the utmost concern into the courtyard.

Another few minutes and the outer door was opened, letting in a rush of cool air, by a tall footman bearing aloft a Buhl clock in one hand: the advance guard of the party.

Solemnly he stalked up to the counter whereon he laid in stony silence the dazzling object; after which, his duty done, he retreated to the door again and stood there a sphinx-like and immovable figure.

And there entered, immediately after, a middle-aged dowager of most uncompromising dignity of carriage and wearing one of the largest crinolines Matilda had ever seen.

Half hidden in her wake a young man and a young lady followed more slowly. And this last arrival, dressed in some kind of slight and fashionable mourning, was leading a black curiously shaved poodle by a long green ribbon. A sight which instantly sent the parrot clambering hastily to the top of his cage: where he remained cursing loudly in two languages in his agitation and fright, the invasion being now as obviously unwelcome to him as it was to Matilda's disgruntled cavalier.

"Who is it?" asked Matilda in a low tone of the watchmaker; as the little shop resounded again with the barking of the dog, the shrill scolding of the parrot, and the eloquent expostulations of the two ladies.

"It is," returned Monsieur Le Cheminant in a tone as guarded as Matilda's own, "the Dowager Duchess of Llandudno and her only son the young Duke Victor. The other

lady is her orphan niece, Lady Sarah Hermerton. Mademoiselle is not acquainted with them?"

Truthfully Matilda could answer in the negative; at the same time looking round for the moment, and a way of escape. For she suspected her position to be in the highest degree perilous; as she knew these people to be (from Hortense) frequent visitors at Tilney House. It struck her that for the second time Fate had set her on the very brink of a precipice. And much she hoped that on this occasion as on the last she might be able to retreat without disaster. Thankfully she realized that in the increasing darkness lay the best possibility of her retiring unnoticed, as the hubbub grew in volume rather than died down.

At last the Duchess Harriet, losing patience abandoned her attempt to enforce peace and left her two young relatives alone to reduce the clamour.

A faint frown on her brow, for she was inclined to think that the watchmaker should have removed his pet rather than watch the scene as he had done with such a non-committal air, and looking neither to the right nor to the left, she sailed up to the counter at which Monsieur Le Cheminant now remained.

"My good Le Cheminant," she began, "although it is difficult to hear oneself speak, and certainly almost impossible to see——"

But here some ill-advised movement of Mr. Christopher's caused her to break off; and bring a pair of lorgnettes into instant action.

Calmly she stared into the gloom.

"I thought the place was empty," she said. "Who is it? Do I know you, young man? There seems to be something familiar about you."

And thus caught, with the best grace he could muster, Mr. Christopher must needs come forward and declare himself: dolefully abandoning all hopes of getting out of the place unseen—with Matilda. But before he could decide what he had best do, as far as she was concerned, he was

surrounded by the other members of the Duchess Harriet's entourage and instantly became the target for a very hail-storm of greetings and astonished questionings. Questions to which he advanced the most evasive replies as far as Matilda could gather.

It was at this psychological moment, that Matilda taking her courage in both hands edged herself closer and closer to the door; unobserved by all but Monsieur Le Cheminant.

Smiling comprehendingly, if a trifle sardonically, into his bushy beard the watchmaker embraced that opportunity to leave the shop momentarily; to return with a lighted lamp in his hand almost immediately after.

This he carefully set down on the counter, up to which the whole party talking and laughing had now come, painstakingly arranging its tin reflector so that all the lamp light was concentrated on himself and the great cabinet at his back rather than diffused over the room.

Disregarded and ignored the footman stood in the entry waiting indifferently.

But beyond his stolid figure a hasty glance round assured both the argus-eyed watchmaker and the nervous Mr. Christopher that the room held no other occupant.

Gone as suddenly as the shadows themselves, the third member of their original party had stolen away.

For Matilda, taking advantage of the general confusion, had vanished with her precious package.

CHAPTER VIII

EXPLAINS AMONGST OTHER THINGS WHY LORD GEORGE
REFUSED TO SAY HIS PRAYERS: AND WHAT KIND OF A
LETTER MATILDA RECEIVED

MATILDA was seated, for once, abstracted and inactive, before her dressing table somewhere between the hours of six and seven on the evening of Friday the thirteenth day of April, because her little head was filled with cogitations of a disturbing nature; not unconnected with certain of her duties in Tilney House. But although she was inclined to consider the crisis that had arisen sufficiently important to worry her considerably she was very far indeed from supposing that at that very instant she was on the eve of encountering such a succession of stirring and dramatic events as would entirely and forever drive out of her mind every present preoccupation. So completely would her whole world and her life be remoulded by their coming to pass. And consequently, viewed in another perspective, Lady Victoria's present peccadillos and obstinate deviations from the path of rectitude would (although now so harassing to Matilda) decline into an unimportance of the most complete character when measured against what was yet to be.

The seer's gift, however, not being a usual one, and Matilda certainly not possessing one jot or tittle of clairvoyant power, she continued to restrict her meditations to the immediate present; blessedly ignorant that for her, even then, the wheel of Fortune had commenced its silent predestined spinning.

No, indeed, at the moment Matilda's whole attention was focussed on the equitable deciding of one question.

Was it right and necessary for her to be a sneak—to tell tales out of school—when she hated and detested the idea so much?

That, to put it bluntly, was the decision to be made. For holding as she did an official position in the Tilney household had she a right to maintain an apparently placid silence when, to put it coldly, Lady Victoria was playing the very dickens with her music teachers: Dr. Major (piano), the Signora Delaventi (singing)? Neither practising the classical music they were wishful to see her perform as all their other débutante pupils could and did with grace and facility; nor yet paying the slightest attention to their heated and acrimonious admonitions as lesson after lesson found their distinguished pupil in the same identical state of musical ignorance in which they had left her at the close of the previous one.

Much head shaking and many reprimands continually failed to wrest from Lady Victoria the secret of her snail's progress. Yet Matilda knew the answer to the riddle. And was, moreover, an unwilling accessory to the crime, so to speak. For the fact was that Lady Victoria—hating the classics with a deadly loathing and being, so Matilda could not fail to perceive, still very much under the influence of her old flame, Sir John Marlow—whose appreciation of the great masters was about on a par with that of the eldest daughter of the House of Westmainham—consumed the whole of her hours of practice in getting up for his benefit mere ephemeral trash: and forcing Matilda in consequence to play nothing but accompaniments to songs and ballads of no particular merit musically, but of much sentimental fervour.

Not that Matilda minded being so employed. Far from it, for truth compels one to admit that as long as the tunes were pretty Matilda cared little about their classical value. But being an honest little creature it seemed to her that in

wasting the time of her professors Lady Victoria was not entirely playing the game. Added to which Matilda was beginning to suspect that her little ladyship was making these ballads and songs the pretext for a good many stolen interviews with her whilom suitor: and that the young sly-boots took very good care that her august mother was well out of the way before she sang to her appreciative audience of one.

And yet Matilda having nothing actually but her woman's instinct to go upon was very loath to stir up any sleeping dogs in the ducal household. Dangerous might be the results she knew: although she had not been an inmate of Tilney House for more than a few weeks.

But only as recently as the day before yesterday, she had passed a completely wretched hour on account of the Lady Victoria—it being the occasion of her weekly singing lesson.

And easily could Matilda have laid bare to the irate and black-browed Signora why the famous and fashionable composer Herr Mendelssohn—his *Lieder*, were so imperfectly prepared: and why Lady Victoria's rendering of "On the Wings of Song" was so lame a one.

Had she not been spending all her time over the new and patriotic song "This Is What We Said In England"—the latest gift of Sir John to her? With occasional renderings interspersed of "The Gallant Soldier's Bride"—also an offering from the same military quarter—with devastating effects upon Herr Mendelssohn.

No wonder the exasperated Italian had cried——

"But you do not fly, miladi; on the contrary you creep—you crawl as a snail."

And with much gesticulation and "*Dio Mio's*," had ended by remarking caustically that such poor progress she could not understand.

"*Impossibile di comprendere*——" and so on.

Yet Matilda could have enlightened her as Lady Victoria sitting self-contained and placid on the music-stool well knew.

But when, on the almost frenzied exit of the Signora, she had ventured to expostulate, never so mildly, with the erring damsel Matilda had met with so savage a reception at the hands of Lord Lassington's future bride that she was quite nonplussed.

"You dare say one word, little Horsey, and I'll—I'll pinch you," she had hissed between set teeth after quite a tirade on people minding their own business. And then on Matilda remarking on the foolishness of such a threat—for how could mere bodily injury possibly weigh where duty was concerned as Mr. Francis would have been the first to remind her—Lady Victoria had entirely changed her tactics. And with a romantic and sweetly sad tale of a boy and girl romance nipped in the bud, and the final end of which was so starkly imminent, had coaxed Matilda into a very unwilling silence and submission to her will.

A dereliction of duty which was now causing Miss Horsey all this mental commotion.

In spite of the fact that Lady Victoria had at the same time made it exceedingly clear to Matilda that in a very short time she would be in a position to snap her fingers at all authority; and to shout such songs as "The British Grenadiers"—should she so desire—all day: once she was married.

"And no more squalling foreign fireworks for me then," she had ended; following this pronouncement up with such a lifelike rendering of the famous aria of "*Voi che sapete*," as sung by the Signora—her voice no longer in its first bloom and all her mannerisms faithfully copied—as made Matilda's remonstrance die away in a burst of appreciative mirth.

This scene Matilda was now going over for the fiftieth time at least, her mental eye so much more fixed on these present difficulties of her position as governess to the English children that, as I have before remarked, she was a thousand leagues away from guessing what the future was to hold for her. And that the forthcoming visit of the

French Emperor Napoleon the Third and his beautiful Consort to the shores of Britain during the following week could have the slightest personal importance for her she would have been amazed to learn. Although she certainly was with the rest of the world keenly interested in all the preparations for their coming. And privately longed to be in a position to make one of the audience when the august couple paid their state visit to the opera to hear "Fidelio," and Mademoiselle Jenny Ney. For this occasion she had to own she envied Lady Victoria whose presence there, together with her mother and her fiancé, was quite certain.

But this delight not being for her Matilda fell back on the more modest hope that she might, at any rate, see the Emperor and Empress once. Perhaps on their journey to Windsor: and cheer them heartily on their way. Especially the young and sparkling Empress.

That in itself would be thrilling enough for her, Matilda fancied.

So Hortense coming in on her soon after, she quite jumped, so deeply absorbed was she in her reflections. And it was not till the Frenchwoman (at the same time laying an armful of finery on Matilda's bed) made her surprising and delightful announcement that Matilda shook off her despondent mood, and, roused and alert once more, gave her best attention to Hortense who now proceeded to air her views with all the eloquence at her command.

"*Voilà*," she began, "for all your patience and cheerfulness since you have entered this house, *ma chère*, here is a little reward. See you, I have at last made ready these little robes that I promised you. Miladi Victoria will certainly never wear them again; and, what is more, never miss them. And, *enfin*, without spending all your wages, *petite*, you will be attired in à less dowdy fashion."

As she spoke she pointed an accusatory finger at Matilda. "Ma foi, your frock there is of an hideousness not to be believed."

This being now, however, to Matilda an ancient text for

a homily on dress as the Parisians conceived it, she merely laughed; and running over to Hortense, who beckoned her to come and inspect her handiwork, looked down on the carefully altered and refurbished confections spread so alluringly out on the counterpane.

"There," cried the Frenchwoman, indicating with the pride of an artist the remodelled frocks that in a more or less remote past had graced the well-filled wardrobe of Lady Victoria, "these will be becoming to you at least, *ma chère*."

Matilda's glance roved from one to another of the distracting creations. And she clasped her hands—a habit that was very characteristic of her when moved beyond the power of speech.

"Miladi has long forgotten these dresses," repeated Hortense, noting with much satisfaction Matilda's pleasure, "she has nothing but one frock after another this season, now that she is betrothed. Madame la Duchesse spends a pretty penny on her."

With growing emotion Matilda contemplated the handiwork of Hortense: and far into the blue empyrean she straightway flew on the wings of fancy. For there on the bed before her—for her exclusive use, exciting and stimulating thought—lay three amazing productions. Fashionable to the last degree, with Paris in every line, and each as good as new. A pink tarlatan flounced up to the waist in the very latest style, and Matilda adored pink. A white gauze, also befrilled: and caught up with tiny rosettes of apple green and further beautified with a broad sash of watered silk of the same delicate shade.

And last—but perhaps the most alluring to Matilda's sense of the practical—a plum-coloured poplin.

This costume also boasted a short velvet jacket trimmed with grebe and a little round hat of grebe ornamented with a curling ostrich feather of plum colour. And all this elegance heaped up before her was for Matilda's wearing.

"It seemed almost too good to be true," reflected Matilda, a little dizzy with the realization.

But there it was—in all its amazing deliciousness.

And she was to own it all.

"*Voilà, regardez moi ça,*" continued Hortense, falling back a pace or two the better to estimate the effect of all this gorgeousness on Matilda, who by now well arrived at the seventh heaven of bliss, was drawing long breaths of absolute rapture. And then to Hortense's increasing delight minute after minute went by as with parted lips motionless as a statue she stood gazing at the entrancing vision before her.

At last she turned to the watching Hortense.

"Oh," she murmured in awestruck tones, "it is almost a trousseau, Hortense."

And then before she could reply Matilda impulsively flung her arms round her and kissed Hortense on both cheeks.

"I can never thank you—never," she cried.

Highly gratified at the success of her efforts to rouse in her an appreciation of a better style in her apparel Hortense warmly returned Matilda's kisses, and stroking the shining head at her shoulder with a gentle hand, "Ah, bah," she declared "as for that—it is nothing. I could do miracles for you if I dared."

"But shall I really be able to wear such beautiful clothes?" asked Matilda incredulously.

With a final smoothing out of the billowing flounces on the bed Hortense turned again to Matilda.

"*Mais si,*" she replied, "most certainly. And I am of the opinion that these clothes will effect a—how do you name it—a transformation for you, *petite*. We shall see. For me I do not find you so plain as they all shout it belowstairs."

She looked Matilda up and down consideringly as she spoke: her head a little on one side, her eyes half shut, as a painter so often approaches his work on the canvas.

"After all you possess an air—a *je ne sais quoi*—and if you dressed this pretty hair of yours less severely——"

"But Her Grace does not care about my curls," said Matilda shaking her head.

"Ah, bah," returned Hortense with tremendous energy "one can well understand why. One is not blind, *par exemple*. But if you only gave up wearing those terrible *robes d'école*—almost uniforms one might call them—you insist on wearing daily—*eh bien*, that would be a change decidedly for the better."

"But that would certainly displease Her Grace," Matilda ventured to point out a shade timidly: for she did not wish to seem ungracious after all Hortense had done for her. And yet she felt certain that if she fell in with the French maid's views entirely she might find the results inclined to be awkward and possibly, even, embarrassing. For she was learning daily that Her Grace held very definite views as to the dress and deportment of every member of the Tilney household.

"And I should not like to displease Her Grace," murmured Matilda. Hortense shrugged her shoulders.

"How often does Madame la Duchesse encounter you?" she demanded with an ironic smile.

Thus cornered Matilda was forced to admit it was very seldom indeed.

"Almost a blue moon when you see her—now that she is satisfied you can control those little imps of hers and can teach them better than any *gouvernante* they have yet had," cried Hortense busily dismissing Matilda's doubts as of no importance. "And you are no longer in the backwoods—you are in the household of a *grande dame*, *chérie*—a very different matter. No, it is your duty to make the best of yourself. And as for me—I believe properly turned out, and *coiffée*, you would surprise us all: and you might," she paused for a moment to make the pronouncement the more impressive, "be as pretty as Miladi Victoria, herself."

But this assertion seemed too far-fetched and even ridicu-

ous for Matilda either to credit or to permit to pass unchallenged. Much she put down to Hortense's increasing affection for her: a liking for which she was more than grateful and which she very warmly returned. But that she, Matilda Hope Horsey, late of the Swallow's Nest possessed what was known as "looks," she could not believe. Too long and too often had the Misses Nixon indefatigably drummed into her docile ear that she was without one single "respectable feature." Whilst as for her nose—words failed to fathom how far from the Greek it had fallen. And how could any female imagine she possessed "features" with such an inadequate example of the most important? The very notion was ridiculous.

"Oh, no," she therefore replied instantly and in all good faith—remembering these strictures, "Oh, no, I am plain, Hortense, downright plain. And, after all, as Miss Sara Ann Nixon used to remark, I have no right to be pretty—a governess."

Calmly she stated the distressing fact; and without the slightest trace of regret as far as the astonished Hortense could observe.

With one of those Gallic gestures which Mr. Bartie criticized so severely the Frenchwoman threw up her hands.

"And one would say that you had no right to be young or joyous in consequence, eh?"

"But I am happy—very happy here," retorted Matilda.

"*Enfin*, that is well."

And Hortense smiled genially enough on Matilda.

"But, *juste ciel*, these notions are but foolishness, believe me, *petite*. Also," she pointed out, "you may not be a *gouvernante* forever."

Matilda considered the position.

"That is true," she admitted: and she was about to add that however future events might fall out she perceived no immediate prospect of a change in her present situation—unaware of the silent weaving of Clotho—when Hortense put an end to these speculations as abruptly as she had

entered on them by bidding Matilda try on the dresses with which she was to be endowed so that she might the better judge of what they still might lack in finishing touches.

"And let us pray to the *Bon Dieu*," piously added Hortense as she divested Matilda of her work-a-day apparel, "that you wear these costumes *de bal*, over which I have expended so much time, on at least one occasion of ceremony a piece."

A prayer in which Matilda fervently joined.

"For I do not think," ended Hortense, "it is asking a great deal of *le Bon Dieu*."

Then for the next half hour she gave herself up to a final energetic trying on, fitting, and taking in of Matilda's new possessions; pursing up her lips as she tried new effects in adornment, and generally behaving as though her very life depended on their perfection of line and fashionable elegance.

Whilst Matilda, a mere lay figure turned hither and yon at Hortense's bidding, covertly watched her new and strange reflection in the looking-glass. And was forced to admit that fine feathers did perhaps make fine birds. And with each succeeding moment a most curious and novel sensation of heady exhilaration coursed through her veins.

"Just as if I were going to do something very exciting," reflected Matilda.

And she took another peep at herself.

"Though when or where I shall wear these adorable gowns, Hortense, I cannot imagine," she said at last sighing deeply.

Hortense, her mouth full of pins, to this merely uttered an oracular, "One never knows," in reply: and sitting back on her knees adjusted a final rosebud on the pink tarletan.

"There," she cried, after a moment's satisfied survey, "*voilà faite*."

And she proceeded to divest Matilda as rapidly of her finery as she had invested her in it.

"There—a little half hour's work and all will be as it should be. But, *pour ça*, you are a complete Cendrillon

la petite, and there needs only for you the Fairy Godmother—*et puis son Altesse*—the Prince himself. As in my tale of Perrault."

An assertion, which although carelessly enough made, yet set Matilda's undisciplined heart beating: for she was just beginning to wonder if possibly she had not encountered the prince at least—already.

"Yes," replied Hortense, gathering up rapidly the magnificence on her arm; whilst Matilda, unaided, slipped on her old school frock again. "A prince and a godmother and a ball *a bien sur*, that is what you stand most in need of at the instant, *chérie*."

But to Matilda, tying on her sewing apron, the order seemed entirely too large a one and the idea of it made her laugh heartily.

"But the *Bon Dieu* alone can divine where they will arrive from," continued the kind-hearted soul, "from the heavens themselves very probably."

"I shouldn't wonder," replied Matilda lightly, and laughed again.

But these fairy-tale plannings were now cut short by a sudden loud pounding upon the door which first caused Hortense to utter a shrill, "What now—heaven alone can tell in this house," and then sent her headlong to open the summons; with vague ideas of fire broken out in some part of the establishment surging to agitated life in her brain. But, very fortunately, no such dramatic news awaited her.

On the contrary—outside in the passage there stood no more important visitor than Lord George.

Stood—does one say?

Let his real position be at once made clear.

Upside down, on his head, at imminent risk of apoplexy, his kilts flapping round his face, his fat legs waving in the evening air like ripe corn in a field, he was most precariously balanced on the mat, for some unexplained and recondite reason of his own which seemed sufficiently good to him.

Not for Lord George, it would seem, the usual dull methods of ordinary progression, owning a spirit as he did which ever soared above the merely commonplace.

But Hortense, when her eye fell on this acrobatic spectacle, was not at all impressed with Lord George's bizarre ideals. Never was eccentricity of behaviour in the Tilney House dwellers at all popular with her: quite the contrary.

"*Que fais tu?*" she demanded severely, as she grasped him by his middle, picked him up, reversed him, shook him on general principles, and set him red-faced and indignant on his feet.

Blankly he stared up at her with round eyes; for Hortense had been the very last person he had expected to open Matilda's door.

And his acrobatic feat, of which he was secretly very proud and which he had spent some considerable time in perfecting, was, he realized, now quite sure to be a failure.

"*Quelle mauvaise langue,*" scolded Hortense, "why is it not possible to you to behave as a little gentleman should?"

Lord George cogitated the point.

"Becaith it ith tho dull," he announced brightly after a moment.

"*Raison de plus—*," riposted Hortense confounding him completely with her lack of reasoning as it seemed to his masculine soul. "And what are you doing here at this time of day?" she concluded in judical tones as, her errand finished, she prepared to leave the room; much to the relief of Lord George.

"I am bringing my little Horthy a letter," he explained secure for once in the righteousness of his conduct.

And, so saying, to adduce complete and ocular proof of the lawfulness of his presence there he produced from some inner nether portion of his garments, after some difficulty, the said document. After which, running up to Matilda, he handed her a square envelope in rather a battered condition.

This done he once more faced Hortense with sturdy, if inarticulate, defiance: proud of the entire correctitude of his behaviour.

Let her come on and be d—d, did his whole attitude most eloquently cry.

But womanlike—such eels are these creatures—she attacked where he least expected; and, refusing to be impressed, as ever allotted to herself the exit speech.

“Ah, *les belles excuses*,” she cried triumphantly as she went her way down the passage leaving Lord George entirely at a loss to understand her meaning and gazing after her, legs planted firmly apart, with cold suspicion in his mien.

“Why ith she alwayths croth?” he demanded as he closed the door by the simple but effective expedient of taking a short flying leap at it; and thereafter flinging his whole weight against it.

“I suppose because you are always doing such odd things,” returned Matilda, as she broke the seal of her letter; which was she found by looking to the end for the signature, from Mr. Francis.

“That’s a very thilly reason,” objected Lord George.

After which remark a silence supervened, as Matilda read her communication, during which Lord George, after wandering aimlessly and completely round the room, came to an abrupt and heavy anchorage against his little Horsey. To whom, we may say in parenthesis, he was already and for life completely devoted.

“What’s it about?” he asked, after some moments, tapping the empty envelope which had dropped into Matilda’s lap with an inquisitive finger.

“You ought to be in bed,” she murmured absently.

A reply which Lord George ignored of set purpose; the reminder being distasteful. He therefore merely tapped the envelope once more: this time repeating his question in a much louder tone. Bed, and all that it implied, never interested him. For him the days were all too short; and between his rising and his setting he never could be brought

to believe that twelve whole hours elapsed. Although he had been informed on many occasions that such a stretch of time rolled by between the moment when he opened his eyes in the morning on a strange but fascinating world and closed them at night after another day's battling with adverse destiny.

"It's some very funny news indeed," said Matilda as she turned back to the previous page, and reread a paragraph with careful attention. "It's the most singular thing—I can't believe it—," she continued with increasing animation as she went on reading and Lord George, entirely forgotten and unheeded by her, remained staring up at her attentively.

Presently he began to gurgle and chuckle to himself.

"What big eyeths you've got," he remarked at last apropos of nothing in particular.

The sound of his voice roused Matilda from the brown study into which she had fallen; and, with a start, she dismissed from her cogitations the strange if delightful directions of Mr. Francis. Laughing she glanced down at the patient child leaning against her knee, pinched his smooth cheek, rose from her chair, laid her letter carefully under a pink china trinket stand on the dressing table; at the same time mentally giving herself a good shake for wasting time. For this was not the moment for too long a dwelling on the news she had just received; she still had duties to perform, work to get through before her recognized evening hours of leisure. Later, after supper, in the stillness of the deserted schoolroom she could, and would, give an undivided mind to the proposal just made her; and speculate, too, on what had made Mr. Francis suggest so odd if enchanting an evening's diversion.

And swift as the swallow across the sky flashed the thought that now, at all events and for once at least, she would be in a position to wear one of her two new dazzling ball dresses.

A stirring reflection, indeed.

Hortense had been more than merely right in remodelling them: she had been almost prophetic.

Truly—one never did know.

And life was full of exciting chances, after all.

"What big eyeths," repeated Lord George in a kind of monotonous sing-song; executing at the same moment with neatness and dispatch, and with enormous gravity, a singular dance of his own invention.

Matilda turned on the gyrating little figure, caught him by the hands, and swung him round and round with great rapidity.

"The better to see you with, my dear," she quoted gaily.

But she found that, surprisingly, the tragic and moral history of Red Riding Hood held no attractions for that matter of fact, hereditary legislator, Lord George English.

Gravely he disengaged himself and shaking a decided if untidy head announced:

"I don't believe that thtory—it's only a tale."

"Oh," cried Matilda taken aback at such precocious scepticism, "what an unbelieving mannikin you are."

But Lord George brushed aside her remonstrance, for he had a further weighty revelation to make—since the subject had come up.

"Sometimes," quoth he, nodding his head most sapiently and looking in consequence uncommonly like a miniature mandarin, "I don't fink I believe anyfing."

"How dreadful!" returned Matilda, fully conscious of the gravity of the situation; but also aware that Lord George being, on occasion, something of an orator already loved words for their own dear, dramatic sake.

"Yeth," continued the iconoclast tranquilly, "people tell thuch lies to little boys. It's all right for Amelia—the's only a baby——"

The inference was too obvious to be avoided.

"Six is of course almost a man," admitted Matilda.

Lord George bent his head acquiescently.

"No one could call me a baby—I wear kilts," he announced sternly.

"But," said Matilda, wishful to dissipate this miasma of unbelief in one so young, although, as he pointed out, already garbed in the garments of adolescence, "don't you believe in history—and geography—and, oh, lots of things?"

But firmly, and altogether unshaken by the immense possibilities contained in her remark, Lord George stood his ground. His was a nature that could be convinced only by the demonstrable and the completely scientific, it seemed.

"Books are all very well," he said earnestly. "And, Horthy, dear, I've made up my mind to write books when I'm grown up—large, fat books. But," he paused to end the more impressively, "I thall get them all out of my own head."

"Oh," said Matilda.

"I thall make them all up," concluded Lord George in order that Matilda might make no mistake about his intentions. And let those inexact and gullible beings wallow in their fairy tales who wished—his air suggested.

Considerably disturbed by this attack on the veracity of literature and history in general, and by this staggering line of conduct for himself as mapped out by the future Victorian statesman, Matilda fell back on what she knew to be a very feeble if ancient line of defence.

"You are only a little boy," she cried, "and you'll learn how silly you are in time." But this Lord George utterly refused to credit.

"No, I shan't," he retorted, "no one can make me believe anyfing. I have a lovely thtory in my head now—it is called 'The Child Bertha'——"

And he continued impressively, his glance sternly holding Matilda's—

"The is like me—the dothent believe in anyfing at all—the told me so."

This was such a direct and veritable challenge that Matilda feeling increasingly powerless to cope with the situation abandoned the field of honour—deciding that a complete change of subject would be best for all parties. Although for the life of her she could not resist one sly if parting hit at that complacent protagonist Lord George.

"Would you believe that I had some sugar candy?" she demanded.

The eyes of Lord George glistened.

"I could believe that," he admitted, and then added with a touch of characteristic caution, "if I saw it, Horthey, dear."

To go as far as this, and even farther, Matilda was quite prepared in order to substantiate her statement. So without delay she opened a drawer in the tall-boy and forthwith brought to the light of day a squat, square-shaped glass jar, or bottle, in which reposed several twisted sticks of the delectable sweetmeat.

"There," she cried, as she held it on high, Lord George leaping upwards in the manner of a gazelle, whilst she made a most frightful face at him that caused him to prance and gurgle ever more delightedly, this being a form of badi-nage he could appreciate. "There, you see there are some things you can see for yourself exist and are true, at least."

And she handed him a stick of the cloying but delicious sweet.

Lord George received it with many nods and becks and wreathed smiles, until, feeling that he had exerted himself sufficiently, he resumed his usual composed manner; and assuming once more his air of dispassionate incredulity disposed of himself, sugar candy and all, in a corner of one of the windows. Here he prepared to amuse himself peacefully enough in watching what was going on in the courtyard below, and beyond it the traffic in the street.

Suddenly he spoke again and this time he appeared to be slightly puzzled at what he was himself going to remark.

"But when it's eaten—it's not true, Horthey, dear," he said. "It's not even there, then."

However this piece of casuistry, or philosophy, whichever way it is put, was too much for Matilda.

"You shouldn't be so wedded to your opinions," she declared coldly; and to her intense if astonished satisfaction this random shot had the merit of silencing his forensic artillery. Relieved therefore that for the time being he had come to the end of his disturbing rhetoric, so markedly revolutionary in its leanings, Matilda abandoned Lord George to his own resources; and getting out her mending basket began to first sort out and then darn busily a pile of stockings and socks which belonged to the Ladies Caroline and Charlotte. And which, as the result of much hard service, were decidedly the worse for wear.

And again peace brooded over the room.

At length the striking of the half hour by the clock on her mantelpiece halted Matilda's busy fingers.

"Where are the little girls?" she asked.

Ruminating on designs of his own anent the next day's doings, Lord George suspended his calculations and brought his great brain to bear on this question. Which was hard to answer for he and his sisters had not met for some considerable time.

"I fink," he said after a weighty consideration, "they are downstairs in the drawing-room with Tory—and her friend Lady Tharah."

Matilda looked up quickly.

"Lady Sarah—who?" she demanded.

"Just Lady Tharah—the's a friend of Torie's."

"Oh—" said Matilda, "I wonder——"

And then she fell silent and thoughtfully continued her darning operations with an industry that was beyond praise. After a short pause devoted to a final gastronomic effort, Lord George remarked with decision that he did not like Lady Sarah.

"Why not?"

Lord George drew himself up.

"The's a horrid fing—the thlapped me oncth."

"And what had you been doing?" returned Matilda, who after some weeks of experience was well acquainted with his remarkable propensities for mischief.

Over his face flitted a curious expression.

"I wath only talking to her poodle dog," he replied cautiously. "I wasn't even teasing it—she's a thneak."

Matilda shook her head.

"I expect you were doing something tiresome," she said.

But she was not able to pursue the subject farther, intriguing as it sounded, nor yet make any more enquiries, however guarded, as to the identity of Lady Victoria's special friend whose displeasure at Lord George's bold chat with her pet had resulted in the chastisement he so much resented; for at this juncture, as Matilda had been expecting for some minutes past, the door opened widely to admit that benevolent if firm ruling potentate of the Westmainham nursery—Mrs. Jemima Cross. Who entered, large and comfortable, bearing the Lady Amelia on her extremely capable left arm.

"Ah," said she, her glance falling immediately with quiet satisfaction on the still figure of the Duchess's younger son in the window. "Ah, I thought he would be here. Now, you're to come at once, my lord. So bid Miss Horsey—good-night. I'm sure she's had enough and to spare of your company.

"He's been very good," interjected Matilda mildly.

"Unusual for him," commented Mrs. Cross drily. "But he is not so good after all, for I've been hunting for him everywhere. It's long past his bedtime."

Dispassionately and without any heat she uttered the damaging accusation.

Matilda threw a chiding look towards that spot wherein her distinguished guest tarried.

"Tut, tut," said she, with a distant reminiscence of Mr. Francis in her manner, "so you've been hiding from Nurse

Cross again; I wish I had known that. It was very naughty."

But Lord George expostulated most warmly with her for accepting so jaundiced a view of his conduct. And assuming an expression of great obstinacy and cunning assured her in the most moving terms that he had had no guilty intention of hiding whatsoever. No indeed—far, very far from it.

Besides had he intended seeking cover, as Nurse Cross insinuated, no one would have run him to earth without a considerable amount of trouble—a very considerable amount.

That—he could call the very heavens themselves to witness: as also the Ladies Caroline and Charlotte, who had never been known by any chance to penetrate the secret of his cave of Adullam—when playing hide-and-seek with him.

So comically earnest was he about it all that he made both Matilda and Mrs. Cross laugh heartily, to his frank disgust. Whilst from the chubby Lady Amelia there proceeded a low and derisive chuckle which inflamed him yet further. And when, pointing a fat finger at the incensed creature, she followed this up by announcing more than once and with quite unnecessary clarity of diction that, "Gerbee was a bad boy—a very bad boy," his choler became almost uncontrollable.

Most unfortunately for Lady Amelia who imagined, erroneously as it turned out, that she was adding her small quota to the gaiety of nations this, to him, utterly uncalled for levity and unwarrantable criticism of his conduct had the most sinister effect on her brother. For with him it was merely so much flat provocation. And as with him to receive provocation of any kind, and no matter from what quarter, was to meet it with resolute action—he now took immediate and summary vengeance.

Therefore directing one look of unutterable contempt at her for her ill-timed temerity in thrusting in amongst her elders a conversational oar so little desired, Lord George

strode deliberately up to his sister—who was now standing carelessly by her nurse—and knocked her flat. By the simple means of landing her a good straight punch right in the very centre of her blue sash. So that she found herself employing a recumbent attitude of body, if not of mind, with a despatch that took her breath away. And with so much impetus that, to be accurate, she even, to Matilda, seemed to bounce; so great was the force of his blow. And Lady Amelia was—fat.

All this happened in the twinkling of an eye too, before either the horrified Matilda or the thoroughly roused Mrs. Cross could raise a finger to avert the catastrophe.

"That will teach you," remarked Lord George nonchalantly as, having meted out swift justice, he retreated once more to his old outpost in the window.

Lady Amelia raised herself, though not without difficulty, to a sitting posture.

"It won't," she shrieked back defiantly; and then proceeded with rhythmical deliberation to utter yell upon yell of the most ear-splitting calibre.

Swiftly Mrs. Cross, for one so generously endowed with the embonpoint of middle-age, stooped to pick up the Lady Amelia: and advancing with the screaming child on the too truculent George dealt him a smart box on the ear. After which, methodically she bent her energies to calming her outraged charge.

Lord George, but for a wry face, made no movement of any kind.

"There, there, my pretty," cried Nurse Cross, "don't you take any notice of him—a rampageous, ill-mannered lad if ever there was one. Don't you give him the satisfaction of seeing you cry, my lovely. A nasty, horrid, little boy he is."

But, in spite of this appeal to proper pride, it was not till Matilda produced a large stick of the sugar candy Lord George had earlier sampled that the wails of the Lady Amelia grew less in volume and finally died away.

It was certainly a good ten minutes before peace was entirely restored.

"Now," said Mrs. Cross, stern determination written plain on every feature, "you'll go to bed at once, my man. And if you make as much fuss as you did last night about saying your prayers—you'll get the slipper."

"Dear, dear," sighed Matilda on hearing of these misdoings of the previous evening, "what makes you so naughty?"

Still lounging darkly in the shadow of the curtain Lord George professed himself quite at a loss to supply any satisfactory answer to this question. On general principles he put the tendency down to Satan; but, he added, with a praiseworthy desire to be accurate—sometimes he thought of things himself.

Nurse Cross nodded a vigorous agreement.

"I can answer for that—a limb of old Nick, that's what you are," she returned. "But you'll not be so free in your talk, my lord. And you'll say your prayers tonight like a young gentleman."

To this ultimatum, however, Lord George opposed a very decided negative; adding further that slipper, or no slipper—it would make no difference.

"No difference," he repeated firmly.

This continued flying of the flag of rank rebellion was beginning to agitate Matilda; who stared at him in increasing wonderment and perturbation. Could he possibly, she speculated, her mind reverting to his earlier very doubtful pronouncements, have abandoned religion—at so tender an age?

Dreadful and disquieting thought.

But surely one so young could not fall away from grace so soon. It must be out of the question that Lord George, at six years of age, could be what Miss Sara Ann Nixon had always dubbed old Silas—because he would not go to church—"an unbeliever."

However, her troubled glance seeking that of Mrs. Cross:

for further elucidation of these ominous and obscure assertions on the part of Lord George English, she was relieved to find that the head of the nursery was not in the least disturbed by his defiant and unchristian attitude.

With extreme placidity all she remarked was—

“You’ll say your prayers, or I’m a Dutchman.”

And Matilda breathed again; although Lord George remained equally recalcitrant and obdurate.

“I won’t say them tonight,” he repeated—with a touch of almost Napoleonic resolve, as Matilda reflected, “I won’t.”

And from this determination it was impossible to budge him. In vain Matilda coaxed and Mrs. Cross grew more and more resolute as to the consequences. Nothing, absolutely no consideration, affected the revolutionary Lord George.

At last, all arguments having proved unavailing, Matilda, by this time much the most agitated of the three bethought herself, as a last resource, to demand from him the reason which kept him unalterably fixed to a determination so arbitrary and so unaccountable.

Lord George looked up at her with a maddening smile of male superiority for female want of understanding irradiating his features.

“Because I want to go to the station tomorrow, of course,” he replied.

And then resumed his careless draping of the wall as though the matter were now settled once and for all.

“You want to go to the station?” repeated Matilda after him; more at sea than ever.

“Yeth—,” said the child.

“You certainly won’t go to the station tomorrow, if you don’t say your prayers tonight,” put in Nurse Cross.

“Go to the station—but why do you want to go there?” asked Matilda to whom this curious ambition was news indeed.

However Mrs. Cross explained the situation.

"Her Grace is going to meet the Duc de Lorgny tomorrow afternoon at the Bricklayers Arms Station," she said. "And she promised to take this naughty boy with her, providing he was for once in his life—good. Because he has always been something of a favourite with the old gentleman—I'm sure I can't imagine why."

"He understands little boyths," interjected Lord George to no one in particular. "Yeth, he does."

"And as Monseigneur is coming over from Paris for the celebrations next week—and little you'll see of him if you're so naughty, my lord," continued Mrs. Cross, "he has decided to go to Berkeley Square and to stay with Lady Victoria's fiancé."

"I see," said Matilda.

"The fact is, the old Duc is not too strong now-a-days—he's had a lot of sorrow in his life—and he wishes to avoid as much of the rush and crowd as he can. That's why he isn't coming with the Emperor and Empress from the Tuileries as was first intended—in attendance. But all this has nothing to do with this good-for-nothing little boy's prayers," ended Nurse Cross most severely.

"No, indeed," agreed Matilda: who could honestly see no connecting link there at all.

"Yeth, it has," contradicted Lord George with open scorn. "I want to go to the station; and I won't athk God to thtop me going, so there."

Matilda stared at him in absolute puzzlement.

"Who wants you to?" Nurse Cross demanded making no attempt to conceal her growing impatience.

But the reply that issued from the lips of the graceless George astounded both her and Matilda; and fairly stunned them into silence.

"You do—," said Lord George looking Mrs. Cross sternly in the eye; and his tone admitted of no contradiction.

There was a blank pause and then Mrs. Cross turned to Matilda.

"The idea," she said, "I never heard such nonsense."

Said Matilda feebly:

"I'm sure Nurse Cross would never prevent your going to any station——"

"Nasty, noisy places, with everybody pushing and moving: and everything in a confusion. Give me the old patches for comfort. You know where you are behind four horses," interpolated the head of the nursery.

"Never prevent your going to any station," repeated Matilda, "unless you had been extremely tiresome and disobedient."

But to this Lord George violently dissented.

"Ath it happens it makes no difference if I'm naughty good."

"Oh, I can't believe that," cried Matilda.

Upon which, at last, Lord George condescended to a more particular explanation of the whole affair: seeing that his little Horsey, for whom he had so sincere a regard, was looking more and more distressed.

"It's in the Lord's Prayer," he rejoined. "And Nurse will make me repeat it every night. If she'd miss tonight it could be all right."

"In the Lord's Prayer?" repeated Mrs. Cross amazedly. "Nonsense! Stuff! And Fudge!"

But on Lord George reiterating unswervingly, "It's in the Lord's Prayer. And I don't mind saying it as long as I don't want to go to the thtation." Matilda found herself, though she quite recognized its absurdity, involuntarily and mechanically repeating the petitions of the model of all prayer, in a low tone.

"And there is no mention, of course, of a station in the whole thing, you silly little boy," she declared.

"Oh, yeth, there is," returned the child. "You listen——" And before either she or Mrs. Cross quite realized what was about to do he had hurled himself at Matilda and fell heavily down at her knee.

"This dothent count," he warned them as he closed his eyes: ceremonially screwing them up as tight as possible.

And then he commenced in a loud and monotonous sing song to recite the petitions of his nightly devotions. As he reached the clause dealing with the subject of his daily bread he raised his head, opened his eyes to their widest extent, and fairly thundered the next phrases at Matilda.

"And forgive uth our trethpathes—ath we forgive them that trethpath against uth—and—and," each word now became italicized, "lead uth not into the station——"

Here he made an heroic effort to overcome his lisp; and chanted the final strophe with ever increasing and triumphant emphasis.

"There!" he said.

After which he shut his eyes most tightly again, finishing the concluding sentences at a brisk canter and very indistinctly. At the conclusion of this remarkable performance he rose to his feet: only to be greeted, to his great consternation with violent and Homeric peals of laughter from both Mrs. Cross and Matilda.

"Well, I never," cried Mrs. Cross, wiping her eyes between two peals. "There's richness for you. What ever put that in his head?"

And she went off again.

"Thinks the Lord is against stations—and really I don't wonder. Shows for once the child has sense."

But Lord George looking from one to the other of his hysterical auditors glowered more gloomily with every succeeding second.

"Oh, George," cried Matilda, "it's temptations, dear, you pray to be saved from—not a railway station."

Lord George regarded her dubiously.

"What's temptations?" he demanded. "Are you sure that it's not a station?"

"Quite," returned Matilda, and to clinch the matter added, "I can show it you in the Prayer Book."

"Not—a—station——" suddenly gurgled Lady Amelia entering the conversational lists once more, apparently com-

etely forgetful of her recent spill in them. For on her the entire religious investigation had been having a most extraordinary effect. And she was now, in consequence, seriously considering the desirability of immediately embarking on her well-known histrionic effort of "Four Angels round My Bed."

"Not—a—station—" she repeated gaily.

But Lord George, his theology crashing about him—a very gladius in its ruins—was at the limit of his endurance. And swift as a top he turned on the interfering jade, his sister.

"You hold your tongue," he cried bitterly. "You don't even know what a station is."

After which, bursting into floods of tears, he flung himself headlong into Matilda's lap.

"There, there," said Nurse Cross coming over to take him and gathering him to her motherly bosom, "you shall go to any station you like, my lamb."

Lord George lifted a tear-stained face.

"Yes," said Matilda soothingly, "it was all a mistake, dear. You just misunderstood the prayer."

"And now you'll come to bed like a good boy," urged Mrs. Cross.

Manfully choking back a sob the child slid his small self into Mrs. Cross's warm and comfortable hand.

"I needn't pray any more tonight?" he asked her anxiously.

"Certainly not," she returned, "we've had enough praying these last us days and days."

And thus comforted and sustained Lord George now offered himself to be led away after endowing Matilda with a couple of loud sounding and hearty kisses. Then, shepherded by Mrs. Cross, both he and the Lady Amelia retired for the night.

A couple of hours later, her busy evening nearly ended and over her solitary supper, Matilda found time to read her letter again.

"My Dear Matilda, (it began)

"I beg you will be so amiable as to honour me with your company on the evening of May the sixteenth next. I write thus early that you may contract no other engagement for that date. For I have a box for the first night's performance of the play of Henry the Eighth—which Mr. and Mrs. Charles Kean are staging at the Princess's Theatre (D.V.) on that evening. I will afford me much pleasure to be your escort both to and from the Playhouse in question; and for that purpose I propose to hire a small brougham for your convenience.

"In asking leave of Her Grace, to whom pray present my most respectful compliments, assure her that I, myself, will take every care of you. Be very clear on this point I beg.

"As it is in the nature of an event of some importance socially, and the audience will be a large and fashionable one, I trust you will comprehend the necessity for appearing in some simple little light evening dress. And should you need an extra pound or two with which to procure for your use satin shoes, mittens, and a wreath of flowers for your head, (for I fancy all these things are *de rigueur*) let me know by return of post, and I will forward at once whatever sum you feel to be necessary. I should advise you arranging about your gown, too, without any undue delay—as I know ladies' dresses take some time to be what is called 'made up!'

"I am gratified to hear from you that you are doing so well, and are so content in your new sphere of action. And I note that your duties do not unduly distress you. I am also relieved to learn per your letter of second April that for your arithmetical lessons you use (as yet) *no* key. Let me entreat you to continue without recourse to such pernicious aids. Let it not be said of

you—*video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor*—I see and approve better things but follow worse.

“And I beg to remain—with every good wish for your continued happiness and health—

“Your sincere well-wisher,

“William Ault Francis.”

An amazing communication indeed: and the more impressive to Matilda by reason of its Latin quotation. Yet the more she pondered over it the more she found herself at a loss to explain it. That Mr. Francis should formulate so magical a scheme was of course wonderful in itself. But that he should be so precise in his instructions, so insistent on the fact that she would be in his charge so completely, so careful about what she should wear—in short go to so much trouble over a simple evening's entertainment, for it could be only that to him—quite astonished Matilda. There did not seem reason enough for it; for surely she was not going to meet anyone of importance on the occasion. Long did she muse over Mr. Francis' letter without, however, reaching any very definite conclusion. And, at last abandoning as extremely unprofitable any further study of the “command” rather than invitation of which she was the recipient, she now devoted the rest of the evening to a profound and detailed consideration of what she should wear on the great occasion. For at any rate it was very, very kind of Mr. Francis to take so much trouble over and interest in her—too many friends as we now Matilda was not blessed with—and she would certainly do her best to be a credit to both him and the hired rougham, at least. As for the audience, she decided, they could hardly notice her, having other more important things to think about, and she could sit behind a curtain, her dress should prove too unfashionable.

This point settled she decided, after much deliberation, that (Hortense agreeing of course) she would choose to

wear, of her two new ball dresses the white gauze, green sashed; and perhaps—a little wreath of apple blossoms on her head.

And so resolving—she tidied up the silent schoolroom, wound with great care the clock on the mantelpiece, looked out of the window to see if the stars were shining—and went happily to bed.

CHAPTER IX

IN WHICH THE LADIES CAROLINE AND CHARLOTTE DIS-
COURSE MAINLY UPON THE HEROES OF HISTORY
AND UPON LITERATURE

NO man is poor, affirms that most excellent of divines, Jeremy Taylor, who does not think himself so.

A most profound assertion.

And conversely, it is to be supposed, no man is affluent who is dissatisfied with his possessions, material or otherwise.

For contentment, we have it on the very highest authorities, proceeds from the mind. And is in itself riches—abundance: so to say, a perfectly splendid bank balance.

This being the case, Matilda waking up daily most contented with her lot, industrious to the last degree in all her duties, and at the same time rapidly gaining the affections of her turbulent young charges, certainly was not aware that she lacked in anything that made for happiness. On the contrary with every succeeding week she grew more at ease with and at the same time more capable of dealing with the various vagaries of her pupils. Who possibly, for their part, were if anything almost too generous in their determination to endow their new preceptress with a life full of incident. Indeed Matilda had to own that there were moments when they were almost overpoweringly reckless in their demonstrating of the dramatic. But ever more and more she found herself caught up in the happenings at Tilney House and becoming increasingly absorbed in the thousand and one excitements of her first London season: although she was living it, one might say, vicariously and

at second hand. Nevertheless from the high windows of her schoolroom she saw much that intrigued her: and from her mentor, philosopher, and friend, Hortense, she learned even more. Nor did the recitals of the Frenchwoman lose anything of piquancy in the telling.

So that the morning of the fourteenth of April found her attentive to all the bustle that was afoot, it is true, but occupying herself mainly with the routine of her own little kingdom. Certainly now and then she did fall awondering, as she looked down from her eyrie on to the rapidly budding and blossoming garden below, as to what might be ailing that impulsive and tempestuous little person, Lady Victoria. So out of humour did she seem: and on such a lovely morning, too.

But not for one moment did Matilda dream of connecting her ladyship's gloomy air with so remote a cause as the movement of troops to the Crimea.

That the news of the day teemed with warlike descriptions of the state of the harbour of Balaclava (now crammed to its fullest extent with vessels disembarking supplies for the troops), or that it was fast becoming a matter of common knowledge that the railway was being carried up to the Camp so that shells and powder might be sent up to the front line as fast as the guns could fire, were merely so many items of news to Matilda, she having no male relative fighting on the inhospitable soil of Russia. And as far as she knew Lady Victoria was in a like case. Therefore, that to her the Crimea could be rapidly becoming a centre of alarmed and apprehensive interest never once occurred to Matilda. Indeed so far was she from hitting the right nail on the head that she quite made up her mind that some new tiff between Lady Victoria and her future husband, the much discussed Marquis of Lassington, was the cause of all her frowns.

In her heart Matilda was beginning to be a little sorry for this young man: of whom she had never been fortunate enough to catch the fleetest glimpse. But who, she knew

from Hortense, was not only the richest *parti* of the London season that summer; but also one of its most popular figures. And more even than that, to a young and romantic girl's fancy, a most unusually good-natured, generously lazy, easy-going young man. For so the talk always ran belowstairs: talk which, sooner or later, found its way to Matilda.

"The presents he has given to Miladi Victoria—and she not even *reconnaissante*," Hortense had cried after enlarging for at least twenty minutes on one of his latest gifts to the bride elect—a lovely emerald and diamond necklace he had tossed into her lap one bright afternoon.

But today, Matilda watching her on the smooth lawn below, surrounded by a bevy of chattering, laughing girls of her own age, could only marvel at her pouting air of discontent and feel quite concerned at so much pettish behaviour.

As for her flirtation with Sir John—on all hands Matilda heard it ridiculed.

And no matter what restraint Lady Victoria might be suffering at the hands of her mother there was no doubt that the little chit took advantage of every bit of importance her engagement gave her.

Added to all this Matilda could not help seeing that Lady Victoria was already in the complete possession of all those priceless amenities of existence which not only add to it a zest but protect the fortunate few from the many disagreeable jolts which less lucky mortals too often needs must endure during their life's journey. In short Lady Victoria's position alone carried with it so many substantial advantages of ease and comfort and deferential treatment that Matilda privately considered the child owed it to the world to look at least cheerful and interested in life even if at the moment she was not feeling so.

Matilda here, one can perceive, was of her time. A stout-hearted early Victorian—who knowing her own mind expected other people to know theirs. And who admitted of

very little compromise where duty or courage was concerned: although she disliked sermons on these topics. For the shirker, or the nature that indulged merely in self-pity, she had very little sympathy. For she had been brought up in a school that admired strength of purpose and which took its good or ill fortune with equal equanimity.

The girl held sturdy enough views, we can see, in spite of her gentle ways.

And more than once it occurred to her that the story of the Spartan Boy and the fox which the Ladies Caroline and Charlotte had been studying recently in their French exercise book might be brought to Lady Victoria's notice with some advantage, possibly, to her. For Matilda was beginning to wonder if some concealed grief could be preying on her and making her behave with such a lack of composure and good humour.

Seated in her favourite spot behind the schoolroom window curtains, so that she could herself see without being seen, Matilda watched Lady Victoria first break up the archery practice, and then, when a game of croquet was started, refuse to join in it: sailing off solitary and lackadaisical to a distant seat under a beech tree with a book in spite of the expostulations of her girl friends. A book which, by the way, she quite evidently did not intend to read. For although Matilda could see even at that distance, from the colour of its cover, that the volume was Miss Brontë's delightful work entitled "Villette," and knew it from delicious experience to be quite enthralling, yet for half an hour Lady Victoria never even turned one page.

Her head bent over her sewing, Matilda sat working and pondering until glancing out of the window once more, some time later, she found that Lady Victoria had been joined in her rustic retirement by a newcomer with whom she was now animatedly enough talking. And now it was Matilda's turn to colour up and breathe less easily—for in this young lady seated by the future Marchioness of Lassington, her

huddle stretched on the grass at her feet, Matilda recognized that very same Lady Sarah Hemerton whom she had encountered for a moment at the shop of Monsieur Le Cheminant on that famous afternoon of watch hunting now receding so quickly into the distance. A trifle wistfully she gazed down upon Lady Victoria's companion. For this young lady had the pleasure of really knowing Mr. Christopher—that dashing rescuer of damsels in distress. Was indeed quite possibly an old friend.

Matilda sighed involuntarily: recollecting that she had not encountered that despotic male since that afternoon of Fate. And at the same time across her mind passed the thought that one of these days she must make a second expedition to Kensington in order to have her initials engraved upon the shining surface of her watch-case.

Interestedly, letting her work drop into her lap, she bent her eyes on Lady Sarah, whose fair type of fashionable beauty was so complete a contrast to the darker colouring of Lady Victoria. Much less vivacious, too, she wore an air of cold detachment that set Matilda devoutly hoping she might never have to come up either against Lady Sarah's will, or her schemes, in any way. Although such a contingency Matilda knew would be a very remote one. Still some instinct warned her that Lady Victoria's bosom friend owned a nature it was better not to cross: and one to whom mischief was a pastime of wholehearted amusement.

"I wonder if she noticed me that afternoon," thought Matilda. "It was certainly getting dark then, and there was a most dreadful confusion of noise going on. But I fancied she gave me a sharp look." Her meditations on this subject however, were at this precise moment cut short by a particularly loud-voiced and torrid dispute on the part of the Ladies Caroline and Charlotte, who had been endeavouring to get through their usual Saturday morning's "preparation" for their tasks of the following week as easily and perfunctorily as was compatible with their, at all events, hav-

ing a bowing acquaintance with the different subjects set them.

For an hour previously the schoolroom had been for once, and most surprisingly, a spot of almost complete peace and silence, until Lady Charlotte had started to bemoan her hard lot in the matter of a sudden collapse of memory. Tragically she announced to the world that she could not recollect the name of an historical character she wished to introduce as a moving figure into her weekly essay. One of Matilda's innovations in their scholastic curriculum.

"I can't remember who that stupid old king was who waded to the throne through a sea of blood," she began in a hollow voice—one eye warily fixed on Matilda working across the room by the open window; through which the noise of cheerful chatter and laughter, the click of croquet balls, and the sound of street traffic floated most alluringly. And after making this confession she yawned loudly. But her tactics went unremarked by Matilda. Her twin engaged in painfully endeavouring to improve a naturally bad handwriting by inscribing one whole page of her copy-book with the trite saying that, "All is not gold that glitters," and a second virgin leaf with the sage remark that, "The child is father to the man," was not yet so sunk in despairing attempts at calligraphy, as it should be, as to be unable to accord her sister a somewhat divided attention.

Reflectively she poised her pen in mid-air.

"Henry the Eighth wasn't it? Or John—or someone?" she murmured: returning to her labours—tongue well out and steeped to the wrists in ink.

But Lady Charlotte shook her pigtails decidedly.

"I'm certain it wasn't Henry—I know all about him," she replied. "Besides he had enough to do cutting off his wives' heads, without doing any wading as well, poor man."

Lady Caroline again for an instant suspended her pen on its voyage to the inkstand.

"I shouldn't call him poor, myself," she remarked thoughtfully. "Not with all those wives. It must have been very exciting being a wife then—never knowing what was going to happen to your head from one day to another."

Lady Charlotte, all knitted brow and rugged purpose to discover the missing name of her monarch, looked up from behind a rampart of books and lexicons.

"Everybody who was anybody had his head cut off in those days. It was the most fashionable way of dying."

Authoritatively she made the statement and resumed her consulting of the tomes spread round her. But Lady Caroline looked very dubious. That those born with a silver spoon in their mouths should be placed in such a position as not to be able to make use of that article did not seem at all sensible to her mind.

"Ridiculously upsetting, I call it," she remarked coldly: and with that she returned to her copy book.

After a moment she added—in jerks—because she was writing with immense difficulty (up-strokes thin, down-strokes thick) the word "glitters."

"Torie—would have had her head off—at once. Henry the Eighth never could have—stood her."

Triumphantly she brought the word and her sentence to a perfectly synchronized conclusion. Lady Charlotte nodded and, still with an eye on the distant Matilda, assumed an air of Solomonlike wisdom.

"I don't believe Doodles will be able to stand her, as it is. I heard Nurse Cross say so the day before yesterday. And," and she lowered her voice to yet deeper depths, "did you hear her tell Sarah last night he hadn't been to see her for ten days?"

"Who cares?" demanded Lady Caroline impatiently.

"I'm sure I don't," returned her twin, "only she is making Mama so cross."

Then she dismissed the subject for one that was much more personally disturbing at the moment.

"Oh, bother that tiresome old king—the paddling one, I mean. Can't you think of his name?"

Lady Caroline shook her head.

"How am I to go on with my essay," demanded the Lady Charlotte, "if I can't find out?"

The question seemed a fair one, but Lady Caroline ignored it blandly. Too well she knew her sister and that rising inflection in her voice which presaged heavy weather. So, wise in her day and generation, she thrust a verbal red herring well across the path of historical research.

"What is your essay about?" she inquired politely. And as she hoped, rather than actually anticipated, the pride of authorship enveloping the Lady Charlotte thrust aside for the moment all other considerations.

Proudly she raised her head.

"Do you really want to know?" she asked.

For a second there was a pause—an awkward silence—for Lady Caroline now felt herself unable to utter the lie which she had brought entirely on herself by her rash question. So, alas, does man shun Scylla and fall a victim to Charybdis too frequently.

But at last Lady Caroline nodded silently: it was all to which she felt herself equal. This however was more than sufficient for the Lady Charlotte.

"It's a splendid title," she began proudly. "I copied it out of a book. It is—" And here she drew a deep breath in order to be ready for all eventualities.

"The bias of a republican society is to invest unconditional construction in a powerful man."

"Well!" murmured Lady Caroline, her powers of suspension entirely removed—fortunately only temporarily—by this unlooked-for literary magnificence on the part of her sister. Little did the absent Lord George, seated at the moment on the stool of repentance in the nursery corner, imagine that here amongst his own people was another prophet, as it were, rising on the horizon: another literary light of the first magnitude.

"Well!" repeated Lady Caroline, after a pause, seeing that something more was evidently expected of her. "And how do you begin?"

Again Lady Charlotte reared her small head, as a warhorse at the welcome sound of the bugles blowing, and continued blithely:

"I begin with a quotation—little Ponikins likes quotations. I got this one out of the *Illustrated London News* down in the drawing-room yesterday."

"Oh," said her sister, "I wondered what you were doing scribbling in that corner for so long."

"And it's poetry—real poetry," added the literary artist with pride.

Again there ensued a slight pause. For if there was one thing more than another that Lady Caroline detested and distrusted—it was the art of poesy. Many a weary hour had she spent committing long stanzas of utterly incomprehensible verse to memory, only to find that, when she considered the task finished, her memory contained not the word of the absurd nonsense.

Poetry—no: decidedly not.

The pause lengthened.

"Shall I read it to you?" inquired, at last, her sister with insinuating graciousness.

Dejectedly Lady Caroline submitted and nodded again. She had she realized after all drawn down upon her head her own doom. And, perhaps, almost anything was better than to continue inscribing absurd aphorisms in her Foster's Copy Books For Ladies—price six-pence. That way mischief, sooner or later, beckoned alluringly. Sooner—usually.

"Go on," said Lady Caroline.

So thus encouraged, Lady Charlotte threw back her pig-tails, cleared her throat, and started on her recitation in firm if hushed tones:

"I said to our Poll, for d'ye see she would cry?"

"When last we weighed anchor for sea—,"

"What argyflies snivelling and piping your eye?"

"Why what a d—d fool you must be."

Lady Caroline ventured to bend forward.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you, Fatima," she said at this point, "but that is very bad language." And she glanced apprehensively over her shoulder as she spoke to where Matilda sat and sewed. But Lady Charlotte secure in the knowledge that hers was no personal responsibility—she not being the author of the classic but merely quoting the passage—refused to be stirred or disturbed in any way by her sister's criticism.

"It's poetry," she retorted. "And poets have a licence—like public houses."

And she repeated the lines under discussion once more: even rolling the words a little on her tongue to savour their fine English and nautical flavour the better.

"Why what a d—d fool you must be."

"SH—sh," begged Lady Caroline.

"Also it's a quotation," added the Lady Charlotte briskly. "And no one can tamper with a quotation. Besides it's about a sailor and a powerful man."

"Go on, then," urged Lady Caroline: on whom all these revelations were having their due effect.

"Can't you see the world's wide? And there's room
for us both?"

"Me on sea, Poll: and you upon shore."

"And if to old Davy I go—friend Poll;"

"Why—you'll never hear of me more."

"Oh, how sad—poor fellow," cried the tender-hearted Lady Caroline quite carried away by this potential sea-tragedy. "Was he drowned?"

"How should I know?" most callously returned her twin. "This is an essay: and that's the poetry I'm putting in—just as I read it."

"I see," returned Lady Caroline, still vaguely troubled by the sea drama just made known to her—poetry or not. "It fills up lots of lines," ended the essayist contentedly.

Now this utterly utilitarian aspect of the case had not before occurred to the less astute brain of the Lady Caroline; but now that the simple fact was brought to her notice she at once perceived the beauty of the idea. And congratulating her sister warmly on her perspicacity and wisdom remarked that she would at the earliest opportunity emulate her more brilliant relative's example as she considered it a most remarkable method of essay writing.

"But now I'm stuck," wailed the Lady Charlotte morosely enough, "if I can't find out about that king."

"Hunt him up in the history book," suggested Lady Caroline practically.

But this suggestion was not a helpful one at all it transpired.

"It's lost," replied Lady Charlotte succinctly.

"Oh," Lady Caroline looked sympathetic.

"And I don't want little Ponikins to find out till after Monday."

"Why not?" demanded Lady Caroline.

"She might keep me in on Monday—and then I couldn't see the procession. Especially if she told Mama."

"That's nonsense," retorted Lady Caroline, "you know she never tells tales. You might just as well own up you're too lazy to look for the book. Well, then, just choose a king—any king—and say it was him. Must he be a powerful man?"

"He must," declared Lady Charlotte.

"Who's to know? Choose any king. That will do quite as well as the real man. It can only count as one fault, anyway."

But the advice, practical though it undoubtedly was, did not appeal at all to the mind of that budding Charles Lamb—Lady Charlotte English.

"It couldn't have been John; he bit his nails," she muttered, endeavouring to take a kind of bird's-eye view of the

British monarchy. "Nor Henry—who—lost—his—son—in the White Ship. He never smiled again. He must have been very fond of that boy. Much fonder than Mama is of Frederick."

Lady Caroline shrugged eloquent shoulders.

"Mama's not a king—she's only a duchess," she pointed out with a hint of scorn in her air.

"And then there was William Rufus—he was slain by an arrow—Red Willie, you know."

"How about Charles?"

Lady Charlotte considered that suggestion offered her thoughtfully.

"The one who had his own head off instead of his wife's? No good I'm afraid. He only said 'Remember'; but nobody seems to know what he wanted them to remember."

Confidentially she broke off to lean across the table and ask curiously, "What do you think it was, Whiskers?"

Lady Caroline, however, scenting danger somewhere, even if well concealed, hurriedly confessed her total inability to supply any information, however fragmentary, as to the inner meaning of the last cryptic word of the Royal Martyr.

"I expect he wanted them to recollect it because he'd forgotten it himself—whatever it was," she explained vaguely. "The same way Torie asks me when Milton was born—in front of Mama. Just because she never knew and wants to show off now she's been presented and does archery."

"Too bad," returned Lady Charlotte, and her eyes flashed with a light that boded no good to her eldest sister: for whom, from birth, she had always shown the greatest antagonism: often to Lady Victoria's blank astonishment, for there seemed to be so little reason for it. And then she added in a stage whisper:

"I consider Victoria a mean thing, though she is a relation. And if she ever asks me a question of that kind I shall say politely—I regret I haven't proceeded so far in my literature book—and—walk out of the room."

This energetic outbreak brought an expression of intense interest and admiration into the face of her small *vis-à-vis*. "Shall you bang the door?" inquired the Lady Caroline.

"That depends on whether Mama is there, or not," rejoined the Boadicea with an admirable caution.

Lady Caroline nodded comprehendingly: she perfectly understood all that the stipulation implied. And her attitude in the matter grew momentarily more admiring. It was so exactly what she would have wished to do herself; although being of a more indifferent nature than the sterner Lady Charlotte her bellicosity would have evaporated sooner. And when it came to the point she would, as she was not, have done nothing at all and suffered at her eldest sister's hands in dejected silence.

"Mama is very cross again with Torie," she volunteered after a moment, "I heard her say Torie wasn't to encourage her 'detrimental' any more. I wonder what a 'detrimental' is."

Lady Charlotte looked very wise.

"A 'detrimental'," she returned promptly, "means Sir John."

"That's a horrid name to call him; I rather like him myself," returned Lady Caroline.

"He's got such nice doggy eyes. Rather like Fan when she looks at her puppies down at Haverhill."

"Torie likes him, too."

"Torie likes herself best of all," commented Lady Caroline shrewdly.

"That's just—true," returned her sister, once and for all abandoning any further interest in the extraordinary literary effort on which she had up till then been engaged. Thus was the youngest daughter of Eve evince her predilection for what is known as a "good old gossip," no matter what time or season, or the general fitness of things.

"I wonder what kind of a wedding dress she will choose," she added, "she's sure to give us things we don't like as bridesmaids. Yellow dresses probably."

"Well, it's her wedding," Lady Caroline rejoined, "we can do what we like at ours. And anyway she's got to have George for her page. We shan't have to do that."

Lady Charlotte looked thoughtful.

"I wonder why she doesn't want him," she said.

"Because she simply detests the idea of his puffing up the aisle behind her——"

That there was a distinct danger of this occurring Lady Charlotte felt bound to admit.

"For you know," she remarked judicially, "George does puff—like a little grampus at times. Especially when he decides to play trains or coaches. And he simply doesn't care where he plays those games of his."

This was a true bill as far as Lord George was concerned. And, in her turn, Lady Caroline was obliged to admit that this shrinking of their eldest sister from being made a mere public exhibition on her wedding day was understandable. For she had to own that, as like as not, the peccant George would on the great day itself decide to proceed in the manner of a goods' train all up the aisle at Saint George's behind his sister on the occasion of her wedding—should the fancy so take him.

And who, as Lady Caroline very justly observed, could stop him then?

Even the Beadle himself, they fancied, would be powerless.

Which was a stupefying reflection.

"But Mr. Bartie believes there'll be no wedding," ended Lady Caroline. "He says there's going to be a regular fiasco: or he's put his money on the wrong horse. And James says he never does that."

Confronted with so much eloquence, to her no small delight, Lady Caroline's twin sat as one stunned—surveying her with widely opened mouth and down-dropped jaw.

"No wedding?" she repeated at last.

"No wedding," said Lady Caroline.

"And what about Doodles? Oh, stuff and fudge, you

don't know what you're talking about. But I'm sorry for Doodles, whatever happens."

And Lady Charlotte ended on a note so reminiscent of the Duchess herself, so obviously borrowed from maternal sources both in sentiment and expression, that Lady Caroline smarting under the lash of scorn employed by her twin, and being of an uncomfortably exact mind, at times, felt it incumbent on her to point out to her sister the second-hand character of her remark.

"That's not your own," she said. "You heard someone say that—Mama I expect."

Lady Charlotte flushed to the roots of her hair.

"And what if I did?" she retorted irately, "I suppose I can quote if I choose. Everybody quotes at times."

This looked at first sight as though it might prove a veritable poser for Lady Caroline: but in the interests of accuracy that young female could be very thorough and also very tiresome.

"You have quotations on the brain," she said scornfully. "Just repeating what you heard as if it were your own isn't a quotation. Besides you always have to give chapter and verse and your authority. Like your bit out of the *Illustrated London News*. 'Why what a d—d fool you must be.'"

"I'm not," said the Lady Charlotte from between clenched teeth, "anything like that. And what do you know about me, you poor simpleton! You can't write essays. You haven't got a brain to have quotations on, I believe."

Stung to the quick by the contemptuous tone and attitude of her sister the Lady Caroline now did some speedy if totally unexpected work. Mere words she felt to be of no use. The insult hurled at her, and an entirely undeserved one at that, was far too deep to ignore.

Swiftly she picked up her idle pen, dexterously she inserted it in the inkstand, and hurled it full at her insufferably complacent fellow student. Luckily for her, the Lady Charlotte felt rather than saw the missile hurtle through

space. Therefore neatly dodging it at the psychological moment she permitted it to hit the wall behind her rather than her small person, leaving a trail of the best blue-black ink in its wake.

"Now—look what you've done!" she shrieked: and instantly joined battle.

Forthwith the air became full of sound and fury.

And Matilda awoke to a work-a-day world and to the sober reality, that as was their barbaric custom when they disagreed, her pupils were having recourse to that most ancient of all ceremonies, the ordeal by battle—in order to settle their differences.

A battle which, as far as a hasty inspection of the field by Matilda showed her, threatened to maim one or both of the combatants.

"Who's the victor now?" she heard the Lady Charlotte shriek.

Their hands buried in each other's hair—the while with lusty lungs they shouted ancient battle-cries—they swayed and clattered up and down the length and breadth of the room.

"Children! For shame! Stop at once!" commanded Matilda as she in her turn plunged into the *mêlée*. It is regrettable to have to record that quite five minutes elapsed—five minutes of brisk scuffling to and fro—before Matilda was able to separate the belligerents, and shake them into something approaching sanity and calm. For the Ladies Caroline and Charlotte possessed in a marked degree that bull-dog tenacity of purpose for which the Englishman has ever been justly famed. And once warmed to battle they rather enjoyed a good fight for its own sake. A lamentable state of affairs possibly—but indubitably the truth.

However, at length, out of the welter Matilda emerged flushed and victorious, if extremely dishevelled about the collar and head, a twin grasped firmly in each hand.

Emerged—just as the door opened to admit Mrs. Kincaid.

"There," said Matilda, "I'm ashamed of you both."

Mrs. Kincaid's glance swept the now statuesque group. "So they've been fighting again," she remarked; and although the occurrence were of no importance whatever.

Both children looked extremely guilty but said no word, either good or bad.

"Weel, ye'll stop it now and ask Miss Horsey to let you go with Her Grace and your little brother to meet the old Duc de Lorgny. He wishes to have you two little girls to lunch with him this day as well as Lord George."

Both children on hearing this looked doubtfully from the waiting Mrs. Kincaid to their flushed and tumbled preceptor. So unregenerate had been their conduct they hardly expected to be permitted to depart at all—at any rate if allowed not without some attendant pains and penalties for such reprehensible behaviour as theirs had been. Something of the same idea also was struggling to life in Matilda's mind. And feeling that if she did not impose any very severe chastisement she must at least improve the occasion she drew herself up—assuming an aspect of great severity.

"You don't deserve to go—," she began; but Mrs. Kincaid caught her up.

"I don't doubt they've been as bad as children can be and not expect a judgment to fall upon them," she said, "but Her Grace has given strict orders they are both to be in the hall waiting for her in half an hour. So you must e'en let them go Miss Horsey: and punish them another time."

"Very well," said Matilda.

And an order being an order in Tilney House, herself sped the departure of her now extremely mild and silent pupils. Returning some fifteen minutes later to her sewing in the empty schoolroom that had so recently resounded to the din of battle.

Perhaps an hour more had elapsed when looking down into the now equally deserted garden she was astonished to see, standing on the grass near the little, seldom-used side-door that led into Garden Street that old and gnarled cross-

ing sweeper whose pitch she with her pupils invariably crossed when going into the Park. And with whom her charges always exchanged remarks on the topics of the day. Rheumatic and bent, she knew him again at once. Almost in the shadow of the door he stood peering about him with shortsighted eyes. But on what errand he could possibly be there Matilda could not imagine.

Judge of her surprise when, running over the grass, Lady Victoria came into view; and, looking round to see that she was unobserved, received at his hands what looked like a letter. Then leading him to a distant seat beyond the archery butts she entered into a long and earnest conversation with the old man.

CHAPTER X

IN WHICH, AMONGST OTHER THINGS, THE FRENCH
EMPEROR AND HIS CONSORT ARRIVE IN TOWN: AND
MATILDA RECEIVES AN UNEXPECTED BLOW

THE sermon was nearly ended, and from her seat in the front pew in the right-hand gallery (in that sitting in Saint George's dedicated to the use of the younger members of the Westmainham family, and their nurses and teachers generally, wherein Matilda ensconced herself each Sunday morning, rain or shine, flanked on either side by the stiffly starched Ladies Caroline and Charlotte) she could look down on the heads of the congregation sitting immovable in the body of the church, their eyes fixed attentively on the preacher.

And this Sunday the high pews of the old Georgian building looked to her exactly like a bed of spring flowers. For every bonnet and every hat was wreathed in some gay-coloured mass of blossom; in which tones of lilac and blue, and here and there a delicate rose, predominated.

And to Matilda perched up aloft a wave of electric and exhilarating anticipation seemed to be in the very air. So that, in consequence, everyone appeared to have put on a gala dress for the occasion and to wear a look of expectancy.

Earlier in the service Matilda had fancied that the very choir had been singing with unwonted fullness of tone. And the hymns had certainly been full-throated. Even the sermon, although she could not have told you one word of it, had been neither too short nor too long to disturb her happy serenity of mind.

Indeed, as far as Matilda could make out, it was both

timely and topical. Consisting mainly of an eloquent eulogy of the French Emperor and his stoutness as their ally; coupled with a dissertation, couched in scriptural terms, on the policy of the new ministry under Lord Palmerston. Who had become the First Lord of the Treasury some five weeks before, and whose accepting of office had been almost coincident with the death of the Czar Nicholas, whose death might have far-reaching results as far as the Russian War was concerned. Or so the eminent divine occupying the pulpit seemed to think, drawing interesting, if far-fetched, analogies between the sudden demise of the head of all the Russias and Isaiah's denunciations of the siege of Jerusalem by Sennacherib, in the year seven hundred and one B.C. Vividly he pictured the ancient scenes and made the most learned deductions therefrom for the use of his present-day hearers. But all this, enthralling as it was, no doubt, to their elders was a little above the heads of the Ladies Caroline and Charlotte, equally with Matilda. And a gentle sigh of relief went up from all three when the sermon drew to its final peroration—and concluded. And the congregation rose to its feet. Down in the middle aisle Lady Victoria yawned behind a grey kid glove as she stood beside her mother and prepared to join in the final hymn. She, too, had found the sermon a shade dry.

But once out on the steps of the church in the sunshine, when the service was over, Matilda was again conscious of the atmosphere of gaiety and excitement which was pervading the entire metropolis on that spring morning. And as she stood with her pupils, surrounded by the shifting decorously conversing groups between the high pillars, waiting till the Duchess should sail out and signify her pleasure as to whether the schoolroom party was to foot it, or drive with her in state (and the great panelled barouche) to Tilney House, she heard snatches of talk about the one theme that was on all tongues: which thrilled her vastly. Particularly did some inconsequent chatter of a group of

girls close by, about the State Concert to be given at Buckingham Palace on the following Friday evening and what they should wear attract Matilda. It appeared that one young lady was going in a dress of pink tarlatan looped up with banksia roses.

Matilda remembered she too possessed a pink tarlatan with deep satisfaction.

At last she caught sight of the Duchess moving slowly through the far-flung doors of the church, the notes of the voluntary pealing out in a final cadence as she emerged from the dimmer light of the sacred building into the morning air, followed by Lady Victoria. And Matilda was just about to make a movement towards her when she saw that Her Grace was not alone. For beside her walked, sailed rather, that dowager with the eagle eye—Harriet, Duchess of Llandudno. And behind her aunt, beside Lady Victoria, stepped her niece.

Matilda's blush of recognition was rosy. Luckily however these august ladies were far too much occupied with themselves to notice Matilda shrinking away into the background and the moral support of a stone pillar.

However perceiving the Ladies Caroline and Charlotte they came to a halt alongside of the schoolroom party, and continued their low-toned conversation. Indifferently the glance of the Duchess of Llandudno travelled over Matilda's Sunday bonnet as she received with graciousness the demure salutations of the Ladies Caroline and Charlotte. But Matilda could not say the same for Lady Sarah. On the contrary her look was long and penetrating and returned ever and again reflectively in Matilda's direction even when she seemed most attentive to the chat going on between her aunt and Her Grace of Westmainham.

Again Matilda found the topic to be the ever recurring one of the impending royal visit.

"So they have really left the Tuileries," Matilda heard the Duchess say, "I hear they spend the night at Calais at Bessin's Hotel. I'm sure I hope they'll be comfortable

there: but, at any rate Napoleon has roughed it in his time. And they embark on the *Pelican* at half past nine tomorrow—let us hope the Channel will be for once in a smooth mood.”

“Antoine de Lorgny goes this afternoon to Dover—to meet them when they arrive. The Mayor and Corporation are presenting some kind of an address,” returned Her Grace of Westmainham. “Personally I’m only anxious he shouldn’t get too tired out with it all. I have a real affection for him and he is not as young as he was. I thought him looking far from robust when I took the children to lunch with him yesterday.”

The elder Duchess professed herself distressed to hear the years were telling upon her old friend.

“But it will be a mercy if we are not all dead by the end of the week. What with deputations and reviews; to say nothing of the Emperor being invested with the Garter; and then everybody rushing into the City on Thursday to eat their heads off—they wanted me to go to the Crystal Palace but I drew the line at that—yes, by the time we all get to the concert on Friday evening we shall, most of us, be dropping with fatigue.”

Her Grace of Westmainham nodded.

“I dare swear there will be a good many of us glad enough when Saturday arrives,” she replied. “And they leave for Dover again.”

At this moment the carriage of Her Grace being signalled as stopping the way she signified to Matilda her wish that both the children and their preceptress should drive back this morning in the high slung barouche to Tilney House with her and Lady Victoria: and after she had taken courteous if casual leave of Lady Sarah and her tremendous aunt she moved away down the steps, followed obediently by the whole group.

“Home,” said Her Grace to the footman, leaning back in her seat as she put up her sunshade and surveyed the world as he shut the door. And the great yellow painted vehicle

rolled away down the street. It was not till they were nearing the gates of Tilney House that the Duchess who had kept a rigorous Sabbath silence during the drive announced to Matilda that she purposed taking her twin daughters as well as their governess to Hyde Park on the next afternoon, from whence a good view of the Royal procession might be obtained on its way to Paddington.

"To see the Froggies," said Lady Charlotte in a satisfied tone of contemplative pleasure.

The Duchess was shocked at the use of such an expression by any child of hers and said so in plain, terse Anglo-Saxon.

"To pay your respects to the Emperor and the Empress Eugenie," she ended.

"But they are French, Mama," persisted Lady Charlotte. "And I thought all Frenchman were Froggies."

Lady Victoria giggled under her sunshade.

"Who taught you that?" she demanded. "Frederick—will be bound."

Both children, the maternal eye on them, had to admit regretfully the truth of her accusation. It further transpired that the Duke invariably spoke of the Gaul in such terms.

"And they eat them too," said Lady Caroline. "Also tails."

"Frederick has no manners," mourned his mother. "He takes after his father in his dislike of all foreigners. One could think to hear him talk they were hardly human."

This was entirely beyond the mental grasp of her young daughters.

"He wants to be an engine driver on the new Calcutta, Delhi and Lahore Railway—because he thinks he could travel up and down India so cheaply and he particularly wants to go there and shoot Begums," suddenly announced Lady Caroline in a deep voice—*à propos de bottes*.

Lady Victoria shot a look of contempt at her young sister.

"Don't you mean Bengal tigers?" she asked.

"Perhaps I do," said Lady Caroline. "I don't know much about India; but I do know it began with B."

The Duchess bent her head slightly, returning carelessly the greeting of a passing acquaintance.

"Just about what he's fitted for," she remarked scathingly, as she furled her parasol. And the carriage now coming to a stop before the massive mahogany portals of her town house she alighted and passed into the hall, every flower nodding in her bonnet.

Lady Victoria giggled again as she made ready to follow her mother.

On the threshold she paused, turning back to Matilda who had just descended from the carriage.

"I'm glad you're coming with us, too, tomorrow, little Horsey," she cried impulsively and was gone: leaving Matilda alone with her pupils to find their sedate way to their schoolroom and their Sunday dinner—roast beef, with apple tart afterwards.

The rest of the day passed all too slowly for the whole schoolroom party. Even a walk in the Park in the afternoon, and a peep at the colourful decorations along Piccadilly, could not entirely make the leaden-footed hours revolve speedily enough. So, for once, the moment for bed was positively welcomed—if not accelerated. And sleep was earnestly wooed not only by Lord George and his twin sisters, but by Matilda herself: who was as keenly anticipative of the next day's happenings as any child of them all.

On Monday therefore she woke up to sensations of the greatest expectation. For at length the day had dawned on which she was with her own eyes to see the Rulers of France. And more even than this, she was to view their state entry into London, and all that was to be seen of gallant procession and cheering crowds in the utmost comfort: and with something of state too for herself.

Gaily she dressed and ran into the schoolroom, where

ate, the schoolroom maid, was even then hanging at a perilous angle out of the window to view the misty morning. On the table the breakfast was already more than half laid.

"Good morning!" cried Matilda to Kate's print back.

And she ran quickly over to the window herself.

"And did they come yesterday—after all?"

Much Matilda hoped "they" had: for she began to feel that she could not bear much more suspense; let the flags fluttering from every house and balcony around be as gaily comforting and full of promise as they pleased.

Kate brought herself and her duster safely into the room again.

"I heard Mr. Bartie say they'd reached Calais, miss. He got it from the *Times* I think. But they crosses this morning—so it'll be evening before they reaches town."

Matilda sighed.

"Oh, dear," she cried, "what a long time to wait. That'll mean lessons as usual this morning, I am afraid. Why couldn't that *Pelican* have started yesterday?"

But the travelling time-tables of Royalty have more to make in than the ardent and impatient wishes of the young and undisciplined. And Matilda's patience was yet to be heavily taxed.

"If I were still at the Misses Nixon," she continued sniffing the morning breeze with rapture—fresh and full of fragrance as it was—"I could see all the gay doings at Dover, perhaps. For the young ladies are sure to be taken over—it's an historical occasion and no parent could object. And there'll be military bands playing, and an address, and the bells will all peal their loudest, and guns will go off. And," finished Matilda quite carried away by the picture she had painted, "everyone will cheer their hardest and the band will play '*Partant pour la Syrie*,' when the Emperor appears with his lovely wife. I expect even Miss Sara will admire her: though she is always very difficult to please where beauty is concerned."

"You do make it sound gorgeous, miss," said Kate. "The way you describe it, why it's almost as good as being there."

Matilda laughed.

"Mamselle Hortense, too, was saying that that French Hempress is a clinker, and no mistake," continued Kate, as she gave a last flick and a promise to some of the larger pieces of furniture the room contained.

"Prince Albert is very good looking," returned Matilda loyally.

"But he's a man and wears uniforms: even a postman can look well in them scarlet coats of theirs," replied Kate, a trifle disparagingly.

Having lately taken to walking out with a postman she felt herself well qualified to speak on the subject.

"Then it's more than the new pillar boxes do in the street," laughed Matilda. "And you might tell your young man to get them altered as soon as he can—for more scrubby little affairs I never saw."

However Kate, being of a practical turn of mind, could envisage no reason why a mere letter-box should be in any way a work of art: and said so.

"As long as the letters get posted safely that's all that's wanted of a post-box," she asserted. And certainly there was sound sense in this point of view too.

How true it is that a watched pot never boils.

To the Ladies Caroline and Charlotte the morning appeared interminable. The hours devoted to education were an endless eternity: wearisome to the last point of exasperation. Nor could Matilda get them to take the faintest interest in the historical fact (which she was presenting to them most conscientiously) that a Parliamentary Committee examined the question of State Lotteries in the year 1808: also that for two hundred and fifty years previously they were an ordinary feature of the national life. That both the British Museum and London Bridge had been built out of the proceeds of such non-moral speculations did not cause them to move an eyelash.

"I'm sure I don't mind," quoth the Lady Caroline. "It makes no difference to us."

To which the Lady Charlotte added, a shade dubiously, "I suppose they had to have an old museum to put theummies and things in."

They had, to Kate's open distress and astonishment, no appetites for their early dinner at one thirty: rissoles ofutton, which on other less momentous days they professed like, and cold rice pudding with an egg in it. And came a prey to the most intense dejection on hearing from dy Victoria, who ascended to their citadel especially to part the news, that a dense fog had hung over the annel that morning and delayed the arrival of the perial couple. It appeared that the Duc de Lorgny had egraphed the ominous tidings to the Duchess.

However at a quarter to three the royal train did ually leave Dover, amidst scenes of the wildest husiasm, to do the eighty miles to the Bricklayers Arms tion in two hours.

A very creditable run indeed.

So by four o'clock, all agog with excitement and in their t clothes, the barouche with its load of children—the le girls either side of Matilda on the back seat facing e Duchess and Lady Victoria, with Lord George podgily hroned between them—rolled out of the courtyard: and ftly the prancing bays bore them to the Park.

Here they came into a solid mass of carriages, horses and ir riders, and pedestrians, all bent on securing the best ce from which to view the progress of their Imperial jesties.

Said the Duchess gazing upon the immense crowd of icles as well as people on foot:

"It's an even greater scrimmage than when Her Majesty His Royal Highness, Prince Albert, opened the Great ibition here, in '51."

From Apsley Gate the crowd lined every inch of ground t afforded any kind of standing room: and farther along

it was with very great difficulty that the people were prevented from encroaching even on the carriage road itself. But this was as nothing compared to the scene that met their eyes on the north bank of the Serpentine, whither they made their slow way. For close upon ten or twelve thousand carriages lined the road; and thousands of people crammed every bit of space on the footpaths. But everyone was good-humoured: and the crowd, as usual on festal occasions, was ready to cheer anything, or anybody, on the very slightest provocation.

Close by the Powder Magazine at last a satisfactory spot was found; and here the coachman drew up into line whilst the footman went to the heads of the horses.

As eagerly as her pupils Matilda gazed along the empty, freshly gravelled roadway; along which the procession was to pass so soon.

"Do you realize," said the Duchess suddenly, "that every blessed carriage that we have passed, and about us here too, has from four to eight people in it: and most of 'em are females."

"Well, we're six," returned Lady Victoria counting busily, "and George you can hardly count as a man."

Lord George wriggled in his seat.

"Nothing can make me a girl," he muttered in a low tone.

"If it is anything like this in Parliament Street," continued the Duchess, "they ought to be as pleased as Punch."

"Sally's in Parliament Street," said Lady Victoria. "She told me yesterday every window was going to be crowded."

"And I dare swear Trafalgar Square is a mass of jostling, swaying people at this very moment," ended her mother, holding Lord George with a firm grasp about his middle; so that in his determination to see what was going on he should not overbalance and land in the dust of the roadway.

The afternoon had turned out a fine one after all: and now the mists of the morning had quite disappeared. Everywhere, wherever Matilda glanced, the eye was caught

some gleam of colour: whilst over all the green trees of the Park swayed and rustled. And giving herself up to the general excitement and gaiety of the moment she was enjoying it all quite as much as Lord George himself. Fortunately for her peace of mind she had no inkling that this was to be her last hour of care-free young happiness for any a long day.

Across the glittering waters of the Serpentine, between the trees, glimpses of fluttering flags from the tops of the houses whose backs impinged upon the Park, she caught now and then: a reminder of the more elaborate decorations of Piccadilly and Pall Mall.

"Are they in the thtation yet?" asked Lord George for the twentieth time, at least.

The Duchess drew out her watch.

"It's five minutes to six," she said.

"I believe I can see something," cried Lady Charlotte.

But she was mistaken.

"Oh, dear," sighed Lady Caroline, "What an age they are taking."

"You must have patience," said their mother.

And the minutes went tardily by.

Suddenly a flash of sunlight on the helmet of an advancing officer riding quickly towards them wrought the children to a pitch of frenzied anticipation. But it only turned out to be a solitary rider who passed them in a cloud of dust bent on delivering some special message at the new Great Western Terminus at Paddington.

"That was Doodles," said Lady Charlotte firmly.

Lady Victoria threw a disdainful look after the rapidly vanishing cavalry officer: and so did Matilda. Though her glance was interested, for she was not a little curious and anxious to see this Adonis of whom she had heard so much who was so soon to take as bride the girl sitting opposite her.

"Pooh," retorted Lady Victoria, "it wasn't. Doodles is with the escort."

"Well, he'll be like that anyway," remarked Lady Caroline.

"Yes," smiled the Duchess, "Doodles in all his glory."

"Will he marry Torie in all his glory?" suddenly queried Lord George.

But before the Duchess could reply, "Oh, don't be silly," snapped his sister so savagely that Matilda quite started. And for the next few moments Lady Victoria sat back in her corner thoroughly out of humour and in a sulky silence.

"Well, really," said the Duchess after an uncomfortable pause, "I can't see what there was for you to take offence at, Victoria. You fairly bit poor George's head off."

Lord George on hearing this looked a little surprised, as he took his mother's remark literally. Surreptitiously he lifted a hand to feel if his head was still on his shoulders and heaved a sigh of relief when his fingers came in contact with his Glengarry.

With a bad grace Lady Victoria roused herself.

"George says such absurd things," she replied tartly.

However there was no further opportunity for her mother to take her to task, for in the distance a cry was now raised, "The Emperor is coming!" and in a few moments the long awaited procession approached them, passing the Royal Humane Society's Receiving House, and cheer after cheer fairly rent the air.

At the same moment the Union Jack was hoisted from the vessel in command of the Prince of Wales' Model Yacht Club, and then the whole cavalcade was upon them—six open Royal carriages. The four first surrounded by outriders in the red liveries of the Royal Household; and escorted by a squadron of the Life Guards: the light of the setting sun glinting on their helmets and burnished breast-pieces.

In the first carriage sat the beautiful Empress Eugenie, smiling and bowing with that pretty graciousness which was all her own: on the seat beside her sat Prince Albert keenly glancing about him and obviously very pleased at

the reception accorded the illustrious guests. Opposite them sat "the man of destiny"—Napoleon himself. A man with a heavy face and a pallid look which somehow never seemed to light up. The shadow of those years in the castle of Ham still falling chill upon him.

Immediately behind the gorgeous and elaborate state carriage came a detachment of the Coldstream Guards.

And thus, surrounded by a sovereign's escort, cheered to an echo by the dense crowds along the route, his Empress with him, Napoleon once more came to London.

Handkerchiefs fluttered, hats were waved all round them, and Lord George nearly fell at the horse's feet of the officer commanding the escorting squadron in his enthusiasm.

With all her eyes Matilda gazed upon the imposing personages; and even went so far as to fancy she received a personal smile from the gracious Empress, when the voice of Lady Caroline at her ear startled her.

"Doodles! Doodles!" shrieked the child, in an ecstasy, at the precise moment that Lord George chose for his dangerous plunge forward.

Matilda's eyes followed Lady Caroline's pointing finger as the Duchess bent quickly to retrieve her small son before disaster befell. Probably above the clatter of the carriages and the noise of the shouting, Lady Caroline's shrill and penetrating tones just reached the officer she indicated: for he half turned in his saddle as he drew away from the ducal equipage, and every eye saw him most distinctly wink at Lady Victoria whom he recognized in a flash.

Another tense moment and the whole gay cavalcade had swept by down the road to the Victoria Gate en route to Paddington Station and the Queen's stately welcome at Windsor.

"There," said the Duchess smoothing out her skirts and closing her parasol, "we've done the civil and can go home now."

She gave the order to the footman and leant back at her ease, good-humouredly joining in the babel of chatter which

now arose amongst her children: even Lady Victoria not being above throwing in a comment here and there.

But Matilda sat in her corner unnoticed, pale and silent. So stunned had she been by the shock of learning that her Mr. Christopher—and the Marquis of Lassington were one and the same man. And yet now she knew it to be so, she marvelled at her obtuseness: for a dozen clues might have led her to the discovery any time in the last few weeks.

But so dizzily had the earth spun round with her that she had never even as much as glanced at the escorting carriage or their occupants. And when Lord George bent forward to inform her that he had seen his particular friend "Grosppa Antoine" in one, and had even received a wave of the hand from the object of his admiration, she hardly understood what the child was saying. All the time she was repeating to herself:

"Mr. Christopher is the Marquis of Lassington. And the Marquis of Lassington is engaged to Lady Victoria."

And yet—the words as words meant nothing to her.

So dense were the crowds all making at once for the exits from the Park in the spring evening that the coachman had to drive almost completely round it before he found a chance to extricate himself and his horses from the mass of carriages that filled every roadway and make at a brisk trot for Tilney House.

And for Matilda sitting upright in her seat—both the Ladies Caroline and Charlotte leaning, tired out, heavily against her—that drive ever after remained in her memory as a vague phantasmagoria of faces in strings of vehicles seen through a dense mist: of distant voices smiting on her ear carrying no meaning with them: of sudden jerkings, stoppings, and goings on again, all of which seemed as unreal as any dream could be.

Alas, poor Matilda.

Too suddenly—even whilst one could count ten—had her house of cards been swept to destruction.

Very quiet and very silent she sat there: to all outward

appearance composed and even content. But to so preserve her calm was one of the most difficult tasks Fate ever set her. For Matilda fancied her heart was broken.

At last, to the Duchess's outspoken relief the drive was ended, the barouche rolled once more into the courtyard of Tilney House with its load of sleepy children and the great event was over.

"There," said Her Grace, "for once you've all been very good children. Miss Horsey, see they go to bed as soon as they have had some supper. Good-night, my babies."

And she was gone—followed by Lady Victoria yawning loudly.

Thankfully Matilda mounted the stairs and, turning her charges over to Nurse Cross, sought the seclusion of her own room.

Once there, the door locked, she sank into a chair before her looking glass: and looking wearily upon her sad little reflection cried—

"Mr. Christopher—Mr. Christopher!"

And so crying laid at last her aching head upon her arm and wept bitterly.

CHAPTER XI

CONTAINS AN ACCOUNT OF MATILDA'S THIRD MEETING
WITH LADY SARAH: AND OF HOW HORTENSE MADE
HER READY FOR HER FIRST EVENING FUNC-
TION AND SO DOING ASTONISHED
MR. FRANCIS

TO those more romantically minded members of the Tilney House ménage the final fixing of the wedding day of Lady Victoria for the second week in June came as an earnest of all that was to be stimulating, fascinating, and colourful in the event itself. For from that very instant to the moment of the actual ceremony so much remained to be done—and so much was to happen—that the entire household might be said for the time being to be living in a complete novel or romance: in which the sound of wedding bells came closer and clearer through each succeeding week. No sooner, therefore, had the formal announcement appeared in the Court news in the *Times*, and other newspapers, than instantly from the basement to the roof Tilney House began to hum: and went on humming evermore deeply. At the same time becoming a perfect hive of delighted industry.

And what with presents of the most costly description continually arriving, dress and mantua makers attending at all hours convenient and inconvenient, visitors coming to offer their congratulations, relatives journeying from remote parts of England, Scotland, and Wales to extend their warmest felicitations, together with much good advice, while taking an unexpected jaunt to town, and the thousand and one excitements invariably attendant on a fashionable wedding—and that, too, the first one in the family for

some time—the mansion resounded to the tread of feet continuously coming and going, and the sound of animated voices exclaiming from earliest dawn till long after night-fall.

That the well known and historic mansion was such a centre of interest not only to themselves but to society in general was a source of modest pride to the Tilney House Brigade.

And not even the great battle of Balaclava fought with so much heroism and such losses in the early part of May could do more than deflect their interest from the approaching pageant, now being so busily prepared by them all, for more than a few days when the news was actually coming through from the front.

Thus it came about that in the general cheerful business of the time the wistful silence and pale cheeks of so unimportant a member of the household as Matilda passed wholly unremarked. All the more perhaps because every woman's eye was fixed on Lady Victoria and her wonderful trousseau. Nor would Matilda have had it otherwise. For although to her the four grievous weeks from that relentless day of fate in Hyde Park to the sixteenth of May—on which she was to visit the Princess's Theatre and view her very first play, Her Grace's good-humoured and amused permission having first been obtained—passed like nothing so much as a dreary "procession of armed men," as the poet felicitously phrases it, Matilda would have died rather than have betrayed herself in any way whatsoever. That the discovery of that day of destiny had overcast her whole mental sky, at first she would barely admit—even to herself. Or to what a state of wretchedness each new day reduced her. But that their inexorable and too swift passage did ruthlessly trample down all possibilities of future peace and content for her she was at last forced to believe. For every fresh dawn, deny it, alas, as she might, brought with it a surer knowledge that her heart was no longer her own: whilst every new evening taught her, one way or another, of

some fresh barrier being raised between herself and the unconscious object of her newly awakened love.

And much as she shrank from analyzing her sensations, being only seventeen and not yet having made the grand tour of herself emotionally, as it were, love she feared it was.

A very virulent case, too.

Besides which, added to this suspicion that was three parts knowledge, was a girlish sense of shame that she could have given her heart—and entirely unasked—to one whose whole affections must needs be already centred in another.

And, worse and worse, a personage moreover (fie upon her!) whom she had only encountered in her whole life upon two occasions.

Much she apprehended that her behaviour had been in the highest degree unmaidenly.

So it came to pass that Matilda, a little shadowy about the eyes, but in a praiseworthy endeavour to remain mistress of her soul, decided to devote her spare time to learning more about this new and much canvassed historical production of Shakespeare's "Henry VIII" shortly to be seen at the theatre managed by those shining luminaries of the stage, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Kean.

And so got out her old school copy of the works of the Bard in order to banish therewith from her memory, "all trivial fond records" of Mr. Christopher. A gentle female Hamlet to a most robust male Ophelia, if ever there were one. Alas, never to be again Mr. Christopher to her: but that much courted and popular nobleman, the Marquis of Lassington. And so, at one bound, gone far beyond Matilda's reach.

Therefore duly steeping herself in the long past trials of that sad Spanish Queen, Katherine of Arragon, in the masked and far-reaching policies of the great Cardinal, and the bluffer if equally astute misdoings and love-making of King Hal—the time passed on for Matilda.

And all around her the preparations for the marriage of Lady Victoria became ever more strenuous: more hectic in their hurry and bustle.

Tucked away more than ever in her schoolroom, at last there rose up to her rumours of a great masked ball to be given by the Duchess in early June in honour of the young pair. This was to be, so Matilda heard, immediately after the State Ball at Buckingham Palace, on the first Friday evening in that month of roses, to which of course the bridal pair were commanded. Matilda, sighing, let a thought flit to her pink tarlatan lying *perdu* in her wardrobe. Never, she was afraid, would it grace such an occasion as either a State festivity or a Duchess's masked ball.

A further pang she had to endure when Hortense came to her hotfoot with the tidings that the Marquis was entirely re-decorating his town house for his bride. Until Matilda, stifling a deep sigh, decided that she was glad—wrong though it might be—to learn that the palace of her dreaming would be so altered by the time Lady Victoria stepped into it that alone in Matilda's heart could the memory of it remain untouched. And exactly as it had been on that gusty day in March when she flitted up its steps on the arm of its concerned owner.

Best so—a memory: a very sweet memory.

But if Matilda had her cares so also had Lady Victoria: who accompanied everywhere by her watchful Mama was now filling up her days and nights with an endless round of fêtes, dances, and soirées, and engagements of all kinds. And no longer had the leisure to sing even one song, classical or otherwise, to her old and appreciative audience of one. Just possibly, she too was seeking some anodyne in this whirl of social duties for a pain that would not be denied.

One occasion alone was to stand out for Matilda during those distressful days with any degree of distinctness in after years. But that it was in some sort a turning point on the road she was then traversing she was not to realize till many months afterwards. Indeed when she received the

summons to wait upon Lady Victoria in the small blue drawing-room—so called because of its sapphire Chinese hangings and carpet—to practice certain songs with her, these songs to be sung after dinner to her mother's guests that night, it would have seemed incredible to Matilda that the carrying out of so simple and ordinary a duty could, and would, exercise a tremendous effect on her future.

Without the slightest feeling therefore Matilda presented herself to Lady Victoria at the time indicated: and entering the pleasant room, so much less intimidating than the larger apartment of ceremony beyond it, found herself face to face not only with Lady Victoria as she expected but also with that astute and shrewd young woman of the world, Sarah Hemerton, as well.

With a becoming diffidence therefore to both these demoiselles Matilda made her obeisance: and then stood awaiting instructions which were not long in forthcoming.

"I want you," said Lady Victoria, who was seated on a settee near the window polishing thoughtfully the stones of her engagement ring with an end of her fringed sash, "please, little Horsey, to play over for me the accompaniment of that old Scotch ballad I've heard you sing yourself—I forget the name."

"Robin Adair?" asked Matilda: this being the only song Lady Victoria had ever, so far as she was aware, heard her warble. And that quite by accident. "I think you must mean Robin Adair."

Lady Victoria nodded.

"Yes," she replied, "that's the one. I am to chirrup tonight after dinner—Mama wishes it. And I particularly want to perform that ditty."

With a significant smile directed at Lady Sarah lolling in an armchair near at hand she rose from her seat, and sauntered over to the piano. Whither Matilda followed her to seek for the volume of classical ballads in which the old air was to be found. Then she sat down on the music-stool and struck the opening chords.

"Sing it yourself first," directed Lady Victoria leaning against the piano in a thoroughly indifferent manner.

And thus commanded, to her audience of two, Matilda sang the immortal cry of a broken heart.

Now Matilda, although she set no great store by it, possessed a very pretty light voice: which although untrained, she used in a way that was pleasing enough to the ear, so that she held the attention of her hearers to the final note.

"She sings very well," commented Lady Sarah when the last chord had died away, "one would imagine she quite felt it."

Little did the critic reckon of the bull's-eye she was scoring at random.

"That's the whole art of singing—so my old Signora says," explained Lady Victoria complacently.

And then she started on the moving composition herself with the greatest gusto and a pair of rudely healthy lungs.

Not once, nor yet twice, merely, did she run over the song: but a dozen times at least in the next hour did the luckless Matilda have to play the accompaniment and coach Lady Victoria in that musical work of all others which perfectly and poignantly voiced her own state of mind. At the end of this time the songstress professing herself satisfied with the result of their combined efforts left the piano and threw herself into a chair.

"There," said she in a satisfied tone, "if that doesn't touch Mama up—nothing will."

Lady Sarah glanced up from the book she had been reading and laughed.

"You have no strength of character, Torie," she said. "I wouldn't do anything I didn't want to do with my life, I can assure you."

"And what about poor Harry Romaine?" retorted Lady Victoria.

An eloquent shrug of her shoulders relegated poor Harry to the limbo of discarded admirers.

"He was all very well in his way," returned Lady Sarah. "But he never had a penny. And Vienna is a long way off. I dare say by now he is head over heels in love with some elegant Viennese creature, and——"

"Circumstances change and we with them——" finished Lady Victoria mockingly: but Lady Sarah brushed aside her remark with open indifference.

"Why the fact is," she replied, "you've got to decide whether the game of love for its own sake is worth the candle or not, my dear Torie. Personally, as far as I can observe, I doubt it very much."

Lady Victoria sighed as she looked out some fresh music from a stand at her elbow.

"That's just what I cannot make up my mind about," she said. "And sometimes I almost wish I was dead and buried, it's so upsetting," she added, in a tone however that carried no conviction to the sceptical mind of the Lady Sarah.

"Nonsense," she cried laughing openly at her friend, "you're too fond of the fleshpots of Egypt, Victoria. You don't mean a word you say."

This salvo, as it were, caused Lady Victoria to sit up very straight in her chair and assume a rather offended expression; but there was a perceptible pause before she replied to it.

"Oh, yes I do," she said in a considering tone, "and if I were to die of worry Mama would be sorry then."

But, unfortunately, melancholy though this picture undoubtedly was, Lady Sarah only received it with a burst of heartless laughter. And even Matilda sitting half forgotten at the piano found herself smiling. This Lady Victoria perceived out of the corner of her left eye; and in default of an object more worthy of attack forthwith turned her guns on Matilda, pointing an accusing finger at her and crying, "I suppose you don't know what it is to want something."

"Someone—you mean," interjected Lady Sarah, *sotto voce*.

"You can't get, miss!" finished Lady Victoria with a pout. "Oh, but I do," cried Matilda before she reflected: and then because both girls stared at her in an astonished silence she blushed a rosy red and regretted having spoken. She was to regret it yet more deeply before very long.

"So you're in love—and with the wrong person," remarked Lady Victoria slowly in the tone of one who makes a rather agreeable discovery than otherwise. "Oh, you silly goose!" Which was an inconsistent attitude for her to assume, to say the least of it.

"One's affections will stray at times," suggested Lady Sarah. "You ought to know that, Torie: no one better."

"Fancy a little chit like you in love," continued Lady Victoria blandly ignoring her friend's gibe: and still staring at Matilda as though she considered her to have no right to embark upon the grand passion in any way, shape, or form. "It's too goosey," she added firmly.

"I expect she's as old as you, anyway," put in Lady Sarah, laying aside her book.

"We are all seventeen," returned Lady Victoria. "That's odd, isn't it?"

And then rising and coming over to the piano with a sheaf of music in her hands, she added, "I suppose it's some country curate with a perpetual cold in his head. Do you recollect the one who prepared us for confirmation, Sarah? Who always asked us to 'Bray' at the end of his lessons? I wonder what he would have said if we'd done it. How could you fall in love with a stuffy curate, little Horsey?"

"But I didn't," returned Matilda, very confused at having this phantom stranger thrust upon her young affections so unceremoniously. "He's—not a curate."

"Not a curate?" repeated Lady Victoria.

"No," said Matilda.

"Oh,—," said Lady Sarah softly.

Lady Victoria laid her music on the piano and contemplated Matilda with undisguised curiosity.

"Then what is he?" she demanded.

"He's—he's—a military man, I believe," faltered Matilda.

"Good-looking?" suddenly asked the voice of Lady Sarah from the middle distance.

Truthfully Matilda could answer she thought so.

"They always are," observed Lady Sarah wisely, "these detrimentals."

And in her turn she heaved a little sigh.

"Poor Harry Romaine was the most engaging person I ever met," she ended.

"I wonder why it is they never have any money," remarked Lady Victoria as she made a final careful choice from amongst the heap of music before her and handed a couple of songs to Matilda: who setting them on the rack before her commenced to play over their accompaniments softly.

"It's a law of nature, Aunt Harriet says—compensation or something," returned Lady Sarah: and she got up and walked over to the window. "But no man's worth crying over. They are all very much alike once the wedding ring is on. The best of them are obstinate as Spanish mules—and think they know everything. And the worst have a roving eye."

Thus Lady Sarah most portentously: and Lady Victoria nodded with an owl-like gravity.

"That's what Mama always says: she thinks most men are Turks by nature."

"Aunt Harriet holds that opinion too," murmured Lady Sarah tossing the window tassel to and fro, "so there can't be much in this love business."

"And any way I don't believe I could endure a stuffy life," continued Lady Victoria. "It's all very annoying: why couldn't John have had as much money as Doodles?"

But so simple a solution of one of the difficulties of the ages, where youth and matrimony were concerned, only amused Lady Sarah once more.

"I'd rather have a big position than marry for love," she cried, "since they all say love never lasts, it stands to reason

would vanish much sooner if one were hard up. Fancy living in a poky little house with a couple of maids, and qualling brats all over the place. And no time to do anything one wanted. And getting older and more careworn each year. Ugh!"

This was so dark and desperate a picture that to it Lady Victoria paid the tribute of a very genuine shudder.

"Dreadful!" she assented. "Not to be thought of. So perhaps, little Horsey, it's better for you that you shouldn't be able to marry this—this detrimental of yours."

The continual use of the word "detrimental," appearing to Matilda not only misleading but false in its application and reasoning generally, she felt herself to be in consequence on the horns of a dilemma. To open a discussion on the subject she knew to be dangerous: and yet truth and an impulsive recklessness, which now invaded her, alike compelled her to declare that Lady Victoria had jumped to a wrong conclusion.

"But he—he— isn't—" began Matilda rashly: and then with a sudden failure of heart stopped dead.

"Isn't what?" asked Lady Sarah from the window.

"A—a detrimental," faltered Matilda, on a minor chord.

Lady Sarah regarded her with a steady look.

"Isn't he?" she said.

Lady Victoria opened her eyes widely.

"You mean to say he's got money?" she cried.

Matilda played a bar or two of the music before her before replying.

"Yes," she said at last.

But her hesitation and her air of discomfort were not lost on either of her hearers.

"Then why don't you marry him?" demanded Lady Victoria promptly.

"Because—because—" and once again Matilda faltered to silence.

"He isn't a married man already?" suggested Lady Victoria in a shocked voice.

"Oh, no," returned Matilda relieved at last to be able to state something with firmness.

Lady Sarah walked across the room and in her turn leant over the top of the piano.

"This grows interesting," she observed coolly. "Perhaps he's not in love with you—is that it? Or is he, by any chance, to be married to another young lady?"

Matilda's head bent lower over the keys. Embarrassed and uncertain as to her wisest course she hardly knew what to say or do. Quite suddenly, it seemed to her, she had become involved in a web that might prove her undoing. And it seemed to her that placed as she was any reply might land her in yet deeper quagmires of assertion or dissent. But—never say die. And she was about to frame what she hoped might be a diplomatic reply, when Lady Victoria, to whom this discovery of a fellow victim to romance was the most satisfying she had made for some time, launched another thunderbolt.

"What's his name?" she demanded.

And on Matilda's replying wildly that she would rather not say—she merely repeated her question, adding:

"We'll be as mum as mice in a church about it, little Horsey. But you've got to tell us, for it's too fascinating and romantic: so don't be goosey."

So Matilda feeling trapped and at her wits' end played an aimless chord or two wondering frantically the while what she should say. And then thunderstruck at where this distracting conversation was leading her, and fairly petrified with alarm as to where it would all end, caught at the first name that came into her head. Without as she afterwards confessed—but this was long after—having either rhyme or reason for it.

"His name is Raoul—," she said in a small, tired voice and hoped Heaven would overlook the lie. It was, she admitted also in later times, her first step on the downward path.

"Raoul—what?" asked Lady Sarah: always fixing Matilda with that cold grey eye of hers.

"Jones!" cried Matilda, almost beside herself: on a crashing and discordant chord.

"Jones—a Welshman," said Lady Victoria.

"I suppose so," conceded Matilda very unhappily: and beginning to think that this moon-struck course would land her in bedlam at any rate.

Lady Victoria struck a dramatic attitude.

"Taffy was a Welshman, Taffy was a thief," she sang in her high clear soprano and ended on a derisive trill.

"Yes," returned Matilda hurriedly, "I know: and all about the stealing of the beef too."

"I went to Taffy's house, Taffy was in bed," continued Lady Victoria, thoroughly enjoying herself and indulging in a perfect cascade of cadenza and roulade. "I took up the marrow-bone, and threw it at his head."

"And I wish I could throw it at yours," thought Matilda frenziedly.

"Let us hope—" continued the diva, after having curtsied to the ironical applause of Lady Sarah—much as she had seen Jenny Lind bow her thanks to the plaudits of her audience—

"Let us hope if you ever do throw a marrow-bone at the head of this Mr. Jones that your aim may be bad, little Horsey: or the results may well be as alarming as the new eruption of Mount Vesuvius."

Even at this moment of storm, and shaken as she was by the dangers of the bizarre situation, Matilda's sense of humour did not entirely forsake her: softly she began to laugh.

"I should never dare to throw a marrow-bone at his head," she said.

"Has he such a bad temper then?" carelessly asked Lady Sarah.

"The Welsh, it is notorious, have very quick tempers," remarked Lady Victoria.

Matilda looked away from the two girls' faces watching her so intently.

"I have never seen him angry," she replied. And then determined to change the subject at all costs she turned again to Lady Victoria. "Did you wish to try these songs over for tonight also, my lady?" she asked.

But that young daughter of Eve was far too well amused with the topic under review to make any further efforts at warbling just then.

"Oh, bother the songs!" she exclaimed. "I want to hear about Taffy; for your young man sounds a little bit like Doodles. So I expect I couldn't bear the creature." She paused for a moment but Matilda saying nothing she rattled on again. "Yes, quite like Doodles, Sally," she turned abruptly on Lady Sarah. "How I should love to throw a marrow-bone at his head—or any bone, for that matter."

"You'd never hit him," returned Lady Sarah.

"No—he'd dodge," returned his future wife regretfully: and the tone in which she said it was so comic that both Lady Sarah and Matilda went off into fits of laughter.

Which was perhaps what she intended: Lady Victoria being in her way a very accomplished comedian when she liked. But, be that as it may, the spectacle of that indifferent and indolent person, Christopher, Marquis of Lassington, K. G., being used as such a target proved too exquisitely amusing to both Matilda and Lady Victoria's most intimate friend: though possibly for not exactly the same reasons.

"He would end by shaking you well, Torie," cried Lady Sarah; wiping her eyes with a corner of her handkerchief.

"But John would admire me for my spirit and say 'Gad, it's a spitfire,' you know his way," retorted Lady Victoria quick as lightning.

"I doubt it," said her friend. "For who would like a nasty marrow-bone at his head?"

And then dismissing the subject, with a sidelong glance at Matilda, Lady Sarah took the conversation into her own hands: and, walking away from the piano, asked—

"Did you know, Torie, that John has exchanged into another regiment? He intends going to the Crimea as soon as possible."

That this bluntly announced piece of information was news to Lady Victoria, Matilda realized from the heavy silence which followed. And glancing up she found that placid little lady's eyes full of tears she was making no attempt to conceal.

Lady Sarah shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

"Come, Torie," she urged collectedly, "it's much the best thing for everybody."

"It may be—but I hate and detest the best thing," cried Lady Victoria.

And with that she brought the session, or meeting, to a sudden close: declaring that she had no more spirit to sing, that her day was now quite ruined, that it was too bad of John to go away and get blown up—probably just as she was getting married—that she had counted on his being present at her wedding, and that everything was horrible and disappointing. In short that the world was no more than the vale of tears it was represented to be. And so wrapping herself in a perfect Hamlet cloak of melancholy dismissed Matilda—as downcast, too, as even the petulant little creature herself had become.

With a heavy heart Matilda took her leave of both girls and went upstairs again.

Nor would she have been any the less burdened with anxiety could she have heard the conversation that was even then taking place in the room she had just left.

Huddled up in the sofa corner Lady Victoria first indulged in a good cry and then dried her tears with a dampisp of pocket handkerchief lent her by Lady Sarah: her own for the moment having as usual disappeared from her immediate vicinity.

"Sometimes I wish I was dead and sometimes I almost wish I was little Horsey: she looks so placid and content all ways," she declared.

"Looks are deceptive," rejoined Lady Sarah: adding in a reflective manner, "if you were Horsey you would probably be in love with the right man."

"A Welshman! oh, nonsense," retorted Lady Victoria. "And, besides I suppose he is some little counter-jumper."

Lady Sarah shook her fair head with decision.

"Not at all; besides she said he was a military man, and if he is the man I believe he may be—he is quite eligible."

But the unexpected entrance of the Duchess at this moment prevented Lady Victoria from giving rein to the curiosity her friend was arousing so skilfully and in the rush of engagements for the next few hours she quite forgot to ask Lady Sarah what she had meant.

It was not till some days later that once more alone, and with an idle half hour before them, she remembered to ask what Lady Sarah's cryptic utterance had betokened.

"I've seen little Horsey before, never mind where, and the man she is soft on is not anyone called Jones—or I'll eat my hat, ostrich feather and all—I can swear to that, my dear."

"She said his christian name was Raoul," mused Lady Victoria.

But all Lady Sarah remarked to this was "Fudge!" and then, "Association of ideas, Victoria."

And more explicit she declined to be.

Meanwhile, on her arrival in her own quarters once more, Matilda—very low in spirits—was being made ready for her evening's expedition to the Princess's Theatre by a deft fingered and supremely interested Hortense. Who spared no pains to turn out a most complete and fashionable little figure in order to vindicate certain private theories of her own. And so intent was she on demonstrating what could be done by proper hairdressing and the exactly right kind of frock that Matilda's preoccupied silence passed unnoticed.

At last, with a sigh of satisfaction, she pronounced her task finished.

And leading Matilda from her own room to the sewing

room next door brought her to a dramatic standstill before a long cheval glass—the most prominent piece of furniture in it.

“There,” she cried, “*te voilà prête. Et que tu es mignonne, ma petite!*”

Rapidly she snatched a couple of high-branched candlesticks from a chiffonier close by as she spoke: and with one in either hand lighted up the vision in the mirror.

Matilda surveyed it—at first indifferently: then in utter and increasing stupefaction, finally in an agitation which grew with every passing moment.

“Why—why—I’m pretty,” she stammered, hardly above a whisper, at length.

Doubtingly she sought the eye of Hortense in the mirror.

“Is it true? Am I?” she asked incredulously.

Hortense smiled back at her encouragingly.

“*Parfaitement*,” said she, “a little beauty. And of a chic, too. I always knew you were, *ma mie*. And besides,” she added after a short satisfied scrutiny of Matilda’s remarkable apotheosis, “thou hast race—in the turn of the head, the slender arms, the well-shaped ankle. Also in thy carriage there is a *je ne sais quoi* of aristocrat that is very intriguing but wholly admirable.”

And with that tell-tale looking-glass in front of her Matilda knew that there was no setting aside of Hortense’s judgment as merely prejudiced. For from her little head to her satin slippers she was indeed transformed.

Meekly she followed Hortense back to her own room; took from her, as in a dream, the tiny formal lace-edged bouquet she handed her, assumed a pair of long silk mittens and picked up her lace bordered handkerchief: all in the most complete confusion of soul.

“Yes,” continued Hortense, smiling at her openly, “we all know fine feathers make fine birds. But where is now our little *gouvernante*?”

Where indeed?

And some ten minutes later to Mr. Francis, come duly to

claim her and waiting immaculate and trim in his formal evening dress in the empty blue drawing-room, there entered a shy vision wrapt in an embroidered burnous over billowing tulle, a wreath of dog roses crowning the small head, which at first he did not recognize.

It was not till standing there before him she laughed that he discovered amazedly he was face to face with Matilda.

"Oh, Mr. Francis, don't you know me?" she cried.

The sound of her voice broke the spell and he ceased staring, pulling himself together sharply.

"My dear child," he replied as she ran up to him: and he took her hand bending over it in his old-fashioned and courtly manner, "my dear child, a thousand pardons. But what—but what have you done to yourself?"

Matilda laughed gaily again.

The whole affair was becoming so very wondrous and surprising.

And turned very slowly round so that he might receive a perfect view of her fine feathers from every angle.

"Do you like it?" she asked anxiously. "You said I was to wear a pretty frock, and Hortense remade this one for me."

"It is charming, charming. And so is the wearer, Pussy," declared Mr. Francis giving her his arm in order to lead her with pretty and attentive ceremony from the room.

In the outer hall Mr. Bartie, on duty with his two satellites, for the briefest moment so far forgot himself as actually to stare at the advancing figure with open mouth.

On whom, as she passed, Matilda flashed one of her friendly and radiant smiles.

But, perceiving that James too was openly bereft of his accustomed glacial calm, Mr. Bartie took himself severely in hand and stepping forward gravely attended Matilda's progress to the neat little brougham Mr. Francis had hired for the occasion. And which stood shining and compact at the door. With as much pompous attention as he was accustomed to show the Duchess herself Mr. Bartie threw

open the door of the vehicle and assisted Matilda to enter. Mr. Francis in his turn followed and sat down beside her.

"Where to, sir?" asked Mr. Bartie solemnly: amusing Matilda thereby not a little, for she was perfectly well aware that her expedition had been discussed up hill and down dale in the servants' hall for weeks past.

Mr. Francis cleared his throat.

"To the Princess's Theatre, if you please," said he.

And Matilda sighed happily.

Mr. Bartie closed the door and transmitted his destination to the coachman on the box: who thereupon flicked his whip in a workmanlike manner, and the carriage moved smoothly away from under the great portico into the summer night.

"Now we're really off," murmured Matilda, as the long perspective of lamps down the street began to flash in upon her.

"Yes," returned Mr. Francis reflectively, "I fancy we can assert so much, with truth."

But both of them, as it happened, were speaking from entirely different standpoints: and were not, in their remarks, alluding to the same subjects at all.

CHAPTER XII

IN WHICH MATILDA VISITS THE PLAY: AND SEES AN OLD
ACQUAINTANCE AND MAKES A NEW ONE

THE Princess's Theatre in Oxford Street was packed from floor to ceiling with an eager and expectant crowd. For not only was the production rumoured to be one of the most magnificent placed on any stage: but it was also to be the occasion of Mrs. Charles Kean's return to the boards after a long and serious illness. So the desire to welcome back in fitting terms an accomplished artiste and a favourite actress was uppermost in the mind of every person present. Furthermore it was recognized that both Her Majesty and the Prince Consort were extremely interested in the fit representation of these classic plays of the great national poet. That they felt that the raising of the tone of the theatre and the up-lifting of the drama generally from the merely ephemeral and puerile could not but do good to the national taste. The theatre being a great channel of education: and one of the most popular forms it could take. Possibly they laid the greater stress on such experiments as Mr. Kean's knowing that a nation always sooner or later produces the drama it is mentally equal to and deserves.

Therefore expectation was at its highest: and the audience read with interest the fly-leaf, which each play-bill contained, in which Mr. Kean (himself a scholar and an Etonian) prepared them for many innovations in architecture as well as costume in his carefully considered version of the play of Henry the Eighth. And explained that many of the scenes they were to look upon had been

taken from old drawings in the Bodleian Library at Oxford, by such artists as Van Den Wynrede and Holbein. To the first artist he being indebted for the Panorama of the London of those days which he was showing and which was something entirely new in the staging of such an historical play as he had embarked on.

"I have wanted," he pointed out, "to differ from the stage-management of my predecessors. The management did not then attempt or the public require that scrupulous adherence to historical truth, costume, architecture and the multiplied details of action which modern taste requires."

And with this end in view, if busy rumour were not a liar, Mr. Charles Kean had proceeded to construct a living history in little for the three hours' traffic of the stage which was to leave far behind the more trivial efforts of past days; even the sparkling "Game of Romps," at his own theatre, or Mr. Charles Matthews' absurd and popular farce at the Lyceum Theatre called "Take That Girl Away." Therefore tuned to as high a pitch as the orchestra, the house gradually seated itself and waited for the curtain to rise in ever growing anticipation: an assembly of glittering women and well-dressed men.

Christopher, Marquis of Lassington, seated in the curained shadow of a box close to the stage, presented the only expression of ennui in the whole auditorium. But in replying to his companion's remark he quite obviously stifled a yawn of utter boredom.

"I couldn't persuade Victoria; she says she detests Shakespeare quite openly, and all connected with him. It appears she once had Lamb's 'Tales' foisted on her for a birthday present when she had set her heart on a new wax doll with eyes that would open and shut. But, in any case, the Duchess was giving a small dinner-party tonight."

The distinguished old man at his side smiled a trifle absently at Lady Victoria's attitude towards the classics, as he carefully laid his opera glass on the edge of the box after looking round the house perfunctorily.

"Victoria is always for the things of the moment. But she does not dislike a little polite melodrama: for she certainly enjoyed Mr. Wigan's play at the Olympic, on Monday night."

"Still Waters Run Deep," returned the Marquis carelessly. "It should suit Sally Hemerton much better."

And he took up the opera glass in his turn to rake the house most carefully with it.

"All but one box filled," he announced after a moment: and he pointed out the empty spot to the Duc de Lorgny—which was exactly facing them.

"They are late in arriving," returned the Duc blandly, "whoever they are."

However, at this precise moment, an attendant entered the box: and drawing back the curtains to their fullest extent deposited a couple of playbills on the velvet covered ledge. Then altering the position of a couple of chairs to a better angle for viewing the spectacle, stood back to permit a young lady and an old gentleman to enter.

"So—enter Titania," commented the Duc de Lorgny at Lord Lassington's elbow.

And "Good gad!" murmured the Marquis under his breath as she came towards the front of the box and stood for a moment, quite unself-conscious and absorbed, watching the brilliant scene which the house presented. Her bouquet in one hand, the other clasping lightly her silken burnous, with parted lips and flushed cheeks, she stood looking down at the chattering, smiling, audience. That precise elderly gentleman, her escort, however, saying something to her as he relieved her of her wrap, and indicating a chair at the same moment, she sank into it with a little air of fluttering shyness which one observer at least considered most attractive.

"By—gad," said the Marquis of Lassington again as he watched her pick up her playbill and concentrate a complete attention on it.

"And what bee has stung you now, Kit?" demanded the Duc de Lorgny negligently.

But the curtain at this moment rising on a view of Old Palace Yard, in the general hum of approval that went up when the scene was disclosed, he managed to avoid answering. And Mr. Kean himself almost immediately appearing in the character of Wolsey such a burst of applause greeted him as made the quaint old houses, with Westminster Abbey dominating the background, almost rock again. Again and again the bursts of clapping were renewed.

Unobserved Lord Lassington shifted the focus of his glass to the box opposite, careless whether Mr. Kean's state as the great Cardinal was all that description led him to expect or not. And there before him sat Matilda oblivious to everything but that which was taking place upon the stage. For to her the play was the most amazing and enchanted thing she had ever witnessed: and breathlessly he looked upon it all. The colour and movement and drama of the figures moving to and fro having already carried her into a region far removed from the work-a-day world.

The entrance of Queen Katherine to the Council Chamber was the signal for another outburst of loud and sustained applause: so much so that Mrs. Kean was completely overcome by it and could with difficulty go on with the business of the scene. Even Mr. Francis was clapping heartily and crying "brava!" So delighted was everyone to welcome her back.

And very beautiful was her conception of the gentle Queen: full of dignity and womanhood. To Matilda she seemed to shine out as a jewel set in the rich red and gold of the scene; with its crimson dais and canopy and its gold chair of state whereon Henry sat so bluffly. And in its turn that episode faded away and before Matilda realized it she was suffering deeply with the unfortunate Duke of Buckingham who seemed to her a most unfairly treated man: and quite unconscious that she was being covertly

watched by three people. The final scene of the first act fairly took away her breath with its magnificence: the Presence Chamber of York House showing very faithfully the more than royal splendour in which the Cardinal moved.

"Do you think it was as wonderful as this?" she breathed, as her eye wandered from Wolsey's elaborate chair of state under its golden canopy, decorated with his arms and surmounted by the hat of a cardinal: and then on to the buffets stacked up with gold plate, and the Gothic lamps suspended from the painted ceiling. Raptly she watched the assembling of the guests for the banquet and the unexpected arrival of the King with his fellow masquers. Saw the bland Cardinal's greeting of the newcomers and his sardonic watching of the pink and blue dress of Anne Boleyn in the mazes of the court dance which followed: which she trod so gracefully, partnered by the King. And when at last the curtain fell to deafening applause at the conclusion of the act Matilda still sat thrilled and far away in a world of enchantment seeing nothing although her eyes were fixed on the drop curtain.

Christopher, Marquis of Lassington, leant back in his chair and turned to his godfather.

"Mr. Kean," he said whimsically, "has a success indeed!—if one may judge by but one member of his audience. That young lady in the box opposite has quite obviously gone already into a land of high romance."

Following his glance the Duc de Lorgny permitted his gaze to stray momentarily to Matilda: and then he appeared to start in surprise.

"Why, surely that is my good friend Mr. Francis yonder," he said, "with your charmer, Christopher. Let us go round and speak to him." And taking the arm of his far from unwilling godson he walked out of the box into the corridor.

Matilda was still sitting almost dazed with the magic of the evening when a knock upon the door in the dim

cesses of the box behind her sent Mr. Francis to open it with more haste than might have been quite expected from him under the circumstances. Almost it looked as though he had been awaiting a visitor and one of some importance to him.

But Matilda still dreaming and far away in the reigns of dead and gone kings and queens was hardly aware of the entry of any newcomers to their company until Mr. Francis, returning to her side and standing at the elbow of her chair, said in a curiously suppressed tone:

"Matilda—my dear—I wish to have the honour of presenting you to a—," he hesitated for the fraction of a second, "a very valued client of mine."

"And an old friend, Francis, don't forget that," said a pleasant deep voice in Matilda's ear: and turning her head—she rose to her feet. For before her there stood an old gentleman, tall and erect, a glittering order on his breast, with the dark look of a hawk, and the most picturesque white hair and beard she had ever seen.

"Monseigneur, His Grace the Duc de Lorgny," said Mr. Francis.

"I am charmed to make your acquaintance, Mademoiselle," said the stranger in his cultivated voice: and he bowed over the hand Matilda tendered him as she curtseyed down to the ground.

The next moment her heart was racing madly, and, if possible, her cheeks became rosier than ever, for a form emerged from the shadows of the hinterland and resolved itself into the too well-known figure of—Mr. Christopher. Him, too, Mr. Francis presented gravely and Matilda sunk into a second reverence: not daring to meet his right and quizzical look.

Monseigneur the Duc took a seat by her side.

"This play interests you, Mademoiselle?" he asked gently: glancing from the animated audience to Matilda.

"Oh, yes, indeed," she returned. "This is my very first play, you see."

"Indeed?" said the Duc. "A very notable occasion then."

"I never imagined such beautiful scenery nor such acting existed," continued Matilda in that friendly way of hers.

"And you have all the great scenes yet to enjoy," returned the Duc smiling down at her. "But I think we can say already, eh Francis, that Mr. Kean's Wolsey will be ranked amongst the most interesting and successful of his Shakespearean impersonations in time to come."

Mr. Francis was quite of the same opinion.

"I have," continued the Duc, "had the good fortune to see many great artists play the most arduous rôles of their art; but here is a perfect and nice balance of scenery and acting that is beyond praise. Mr. and Mrs. Kean are to be much congratulated."

"I think it is all enchanting," said Matilda softly. The old man bent on her a very kindly regard.

"Ah, what it is to be young, my child," he replied. "Some day when you are older, if you ever visit my beautiful Paris, you should see the great Rachel. She is still a wonder, though since her Russian visit she has been very ailing. But her Adrienne Lecouvreur is a masterpiece."

"I shall hope to have the pleasure of seeing her," said Matilda, "although I am afraid there is not much likelihood of my going to France."

But the Duc continued his observations on the great French queen of tragedy as if he had not heard Matilda's remark.

"Poor Rachel—I can remember so well her early days—as long ago as 'forty.' Why you couldn't have been born then," he ended sighing.

Matilda added her age up rapidly.

"I was just two years old," she replied.

The Duc smiled amusedly at her.

"A little young for theatre going," he said: and somewhere in the distance Matilda heard Lord Lassington chuckle.

"But," continued the Duc pleasantly, "some day we must show you the plays of Corneille and Racine: and perhaps introduce you, little one, who knows, to a very old friend of ours—of Mr. Francis' and mine."

"Who is that?" asked Matilda.

"A very celebrated lady who owns the largest mind and smallest foot in all Paris, so the saying goes," returned the Duc. "But perhaps you have never heard of the incurably romantic Georges Sand."

"Ah, there is a heart of gold allied to the mind of a genius," put in Mr. Francis.

"Oh," cried Matilda, her eyes sparkling at the very idea of meeting such famous and interesting people as the celebrated French novelist whom she remembered her dear old French master at the Misses Nixon's to have spoken of so often, "how much I would give for the chance of seeing the people you talk of. But," she added regretfully, "I'm afraid they would find me stupid, Monseigneur."

The old Frenchman shook his head.

"No, no," he replied, "you are certainly not stupid, demoiselle."

And then with a twinkle in his eye he added, looking speculatively at Matilda:

"No woman need appear stupid if she recollects two golden rules."

Matilda was curious to hear what these rules might be.

"One is, to listen rather than start discussions; and the other, is to follow the lead of one's partner in conversation as in playing whist, one might say—that is, if one's *vis-à-vis* is more thoroughly conversant with the affairs of the world and life."

Matilda considered the advice carefully.

"It sounds rather easy," she said, "and very pleasant: no possibility at all."

Helen of Troy herself could not do more to ensure success," returned the Duc with a laugh.

Only, as Matilda reflected, she was not in the least like

Helen of Troy. Never would she be in the position to launch a thousand ships.

The orchestra at this moment however re-entering and resuming musical operations the visit of the Duc de Lorgny came to an end: and after taking a most cordial farewell of Matilda he took himself out of the box en route to his own seat.

"One word with you, Francis," he said as he went away and the lawyer followed him into the corridor closing the door behind him and leaving Matilda alone with the silent Lord Lassington.

Barely had the door closed before a complete change in this young man's air took place.

"Well," said he, dropping into the seat beside her. "So we meet again."

"Yes," said Matilda.

"How is the watch behaving?" he continued.

Matilda admitted that her timepiece was doing all that could be expected of it.

"Very monosyllabic this evening, I think," said Lord Lassington.

"I want to listen to the music," explained Matilda.

"Pooh," said he.

His casual air annoyed Matilda and she pointed out a little curtly that his place was decidedly not by her side but in the box opposite.

"For," said she, "the curtain is just going up."

To this Lord Lassington opposed his usual recklessness of behaviour stating that he did not care whether the curtain went up or remained down: and that he was much hurt at Matilda's frosty way of treating him.

"I suppose you never had those initials put on your watch," he remarked after a moment right in Matilda's ear.

"No," said Matilda: keeping her eye fixed on the doings of the first violin.

"Then," returned Mr. Christopher with a hardihood that left her gasping, "I should advise your having them en-

lived no later than the day after tomorrow, in the afternoon, round three o'clock, as I have something very particular to say to you, Miss Matilda Hope."

And not waiting for a reply, which was perhaps just as well, he disappeared in a great hurry: leaving Matilda soasperated with him that it was not till the wonderful scene on the King's Stairs at Westminster had been disclosed to the audience for some moments, and the passage of the Duke of Buckingham to execution was unfolding itself before the attentive house, with its solemn show, its tolling bells, and shadow of the axe falling on the victim of Wolsey's enmity, that Matilda was able to concentrate all on what was going on below her on the crowded stage. And even then the Duke's sonorous and dignified plaint came very much mixed up with a speech of her own she was burning to deliver to another criminal—and that not merely a political one—across the way.

During the next intermission Matilda behaved with a pozen calm that secretly amused the culprit very much: for she either kept her eyes severely on her playbill: or, looking cheerfully to Mr. Francis, would not let her glance wander for one instant to where, across the crowded house, the Marquis of Lassington sat moodily.

Once only she permitted herself to flash past him a smile at his godfather.

But even during the moving trial of Queen Katherine she was very conscious of the darkly penetrating glances he cast at her; and it was not till the climax of that scene when, goaded beyond endurance, the royal lady left the court that Matilda forgot herself once more in the interest of the drama.

In the Third Act Matilda was again lost to all around her: and for her the death of the poor deserted Queen was most too much. With Katherine she suffered and with Katherine she died.

And when the vision appeared to the dying queen—perhaps one of the most beautiful effects, as Mr. Francis

afterwards told her, that had ever been staged—it left Matilda—as it did the whole audience—hushed and mute. And until the lovely group of floating figures had vanished from view not a sound was heard in the house.

Not even the gorgeous coronation of Anne, nor the christening of the Princess Elizabeth, which was placed before the spectators with all the bravery at Mr. Kean's command, could quite banish the impression Mrs. Kean's death scene had made on Matilda. And the last fall of the curtain still found her eyes bright with unshed tears. It was not till the close of the very enthusiastic scenes which followed, when player after player was called before the footlights, that Matilda quite recovered her poise.

Out in the crowded vestibule, clinging to the arm of Mr. Francis, she came face to face with her new acquaintance, the Duc de Lorgny.

"I need not ask," he remarked smilingly, "if you enjoyed the play; for I perceive you are still footing it in a world of dreams."

CHAPTER XIII

SETS DOWN WHAT HAPPENED TO MATILDA ON HER SECOND VISIT TO MONSIEUR LE CHEMINANT

MONSIEUR LE CHEMINANT after a fairly long life went to a very large extent in the study of mankind had more than once been heard by his friends to declare that the male mind was the most unerring piece of mechanism in creation. Provided that it was first of all conceded that no amount of reasoning or dissuasion could prevent it from going on its own not always understood impulses. This was the considered judgment of Monsieur Le Cheminant.

Therefore such being the case according to his philosophy there have of course been pundits holding diametrically opposite opinions—he would have been the very last man in the world to evince the slightest degree of surprise when, after much prolonged and weighty consideration, Matilda decided to put on her bonnet and use her holiday hours in her second visit to his remote place of business.

Even had he been perfectly acquainted with her peculiar situation, of which he was in point of fact entirely ignorant, he would have adjudged her decision to have demonstrated her theory in the most perfect manner.

Matilda's ostensible mission was of course connected with her carefully packed-up watch.

Her real object, which would have again much interested Monsieur Le Cheminant, was a lively curiosity to learn what the Marquis of Lassington could have to impart to her that was considered by him to be so important.

Long had she pondered over the intriguing and baffling

question: and again and again in the last forty-eight hours had she answered the conundrum in a dozen different ways. Each more unlikely than the last. But when every possibility had been explored and rejected by her—for she could find no absolutely convincing or plausible answer to the problem—at last she was on her way, like the practical character she so often showed herself to be, to solve it where alone a satisfactory solution could be anticipated.

From the noble Marquis she would learn what he wished to communicate to her.

But in order to show that she was on an errand of a severely businesslike nature she felt obliged to don her oldest and least attractive garments. Ageing herself as she hoped, thereby, by a round dozen years.

Thus panoplied she set out from Tilney House on foot and leaving the more fashionable streets of the Mayfair quarter behind her ventured to hail a cab in Knightsbridge and was soon far on her road to Kensington.

The afternoon being a lovely one, with an utterly blue and cloudless sky overhead and a cool breeze mitigating the hot rays of the May sun, Matilda, ever susceptible to her surroundings, was soon pleasantly aware of an unaccountable rise in her spirits. As also an unexplainable sensation of quiet content to which she had for some considerable period now been a stranger.

"Which is odd, indeed," she reflected, "for I am not aware of any reason why I should feel so light-hearted."

Speculating on this change of mood she decided afterwards she thought that the state of the weather had most likely everything to do with it.

But possibly here that philosopher Monsieur Le Cheminant would have advanced another suggestion: and one of quite a different character.

To him then, sitting companioned only by the intelligent but slumbrous Riquette, cool and contemplative in his thin alpaca working suit, she soon after appeared: to his outspoken pleasure.

And after exchanging with him the compliments of the moment confided to him that she was at last in a position to have her initials added to her most cherished possession. And so saying she tendered him the package.

"*Bien, bien,*" said Monsieur Le Cheminant receiving it from her and unwrapping it with deft fingers. "It shall be attended to immediately, Mademoiselle. Have no fear that the work on it will not be of the finest. I shall put my whole knowledge and artistry into it."

Politely Matilda thanked him: expressing her sense of his kindness at his taking so much trouble over so simple a matter.

But in despite of herself even while she was speaking she found her glance straying to the window from which the empty, sunlit court could so easily be raked fore and aft.

"Mademoiselle admires my flower borders out there," observed the watchmaker genially.

"Indeed they are delightful," admitted Matilda: but her eyes had not been for the flowers.

"Flowers are a passion with me," confessed Monsieur Le Cheminant industriously setting to work. "I was wondering I should ever have the honour of seeing you again, Mademoiselle," he ended.

"The weeks go by so quickly," returned Matilda smiling, "and I have been very busy."

Monsieur Le Cheminant nodded comprehendingly.

"Ah, yes, the season, is it not? And consequently a rush of engagements."

But as we know it was not quite the case with Matilda: and she was almost on the point of explaining her real situation when it occurred to her that her personal affairs could not possibly interest Monsieur Le Cheminant, who was a perfect stranger, and she merely repeated her former remark adding that of late she had been rather worried.

Monsieur Le Cheminant glanced up once more from his cluttered work table.

"Worried?" he asked. "I am indeed distressed to hear

it. A young lady so youthful as you are, Mademoiselle—my faith, she should not suffer from the attentions of that old hag, Madam Care, yet awhile.”

But unfortunately, as Matilda could have pointed out, the young are no more exempt than are kings and princes—or mere presidents, for that matter—from her solicitude. Whilst it cannot be denied that the grim spectre visits quite as often the pillows of youth as she does the couch of the aged and wrinkled.

Indeed Matilda could have been very eloquent on this subject had her mind not been, at the moment, fairly distracted with wondering whether she had made a mistake as to the hour: or, worse still, fancied she had been desired to make this pilgrimage when no such command had in reality been laid upon her.

A truly horrible thought.

So Matilda now a prey to the most poignant doubt gazed abstractedly out of the window fairly forgetting the watchmaker and everything else for the time being.

Monsieur Le Cheminant watched her covertly.

“It is very unwise to worry,” he said after a long pause with great distinctness of articulation.

His voice made Matilda start and she turned to him apologetically.

“I am afraid I couldn’t help it,” she said.

“But at your age, it is a thousand pities,” he rejoined: adding to himself, “*Mais—on ne badine pas avec l’amour.*”

And then after a final penetrating glance at the composed little figure standing before him—betrayed only by those straying eyes of hers—with his magnifying glass screwed well in his eye and his tools ready to his hand he resumed his delicate work, at the same time suggesting to Matilda, the better to test a new born theory, that if she were in no hurry, and the day being warm, she might care to rest herself perhaps for a “little quarter of an hour” before she went on her way. Meanwhile he would continue on the very

congenial task of engraving her initials with meticulous precision on the celebrated watch.

"Or," he ventured in conclusion, "if you would prefer not to remain, Mademoiselle, if you have affairs—equally it will be well. For I myself will have the pleasure of bringing you your watch, at the latest, tomorrow afternoon."

But Matilda as he anticipated protested she could not think of putting him to so much trouble and the cloud lifted, as he had hoped, from her face.

"So we are expecting somebody," he mused, always working rapidly. "And, my faith, it is not hard to guess who."

Her private ends thus being, as she supposed, by great good fortune unknowingly served, Matilda thanked Monsieur Le Cheminant with pretty formality. Little knowing that she had curiously touched the watchmaker's romantic soul.

"It is a shame that she should be rendered unhappy," he thought, as leaving his work for the moment, he drew out for her an old armchair and arranged it near his bench—good-naturedly placing it so that Matilda's view of the courtyard should be unobstructed—and noted the sigh of relief with which she immediately settled herself in its padded rep depths: folding her hands in her lap with the air of one whose patience is so vast as to be practically inexhaustible.

But the hurried, light indrawing of her breath did not go unremarked by Monsieur Le Cheminant neither.

"*La pauvre petite*," he reflected ruefully considering the case, as he was aware of it, "she plays on the edge of a precipice, indeed."

Shaking his head decidedly at the affair Monsieur Le Cheminant made up his mind to risk a word of warning to the Marquis. Fond as he was of him, and valued friend as he had been for some years now, Monsieur Le Cheminant felt such careless and selfish behaviour as his should certainly be checked. The Marquis must not be responsible for broken hearts and lives.

"And your initials, Mademoiselle, are?" he enquired rousing Matilda out of a profound reverie.

"M.H.H.," she replied.

"*Parfaitement*," returned the watchmaker as he fell to work again and the singing of a French verse under his breath—*mi—voix* as he would say with a laugh—a habit of his when endeavouring to elucidate to his own satisfaction any knotty point whether of philosophy or the humanities—at the same moment.

"C'est l'amour, l'amour, l'amour—"

"Qui fait le monde à la ronde:"

"Et chaque jour, a son tour,"

"On fait l'amour—par tout le monde."

Thus chanted Monsieur Le Cheminant; whilst Matilda listened attentively to his singing.

"I wonder if it—," she began thoughtfully, as some inequality in his working of the metal silenced him for the time being.

After a moment he raised his head.

"L'amour, l'amour," he sang in recitative and with so droll an air that Matilda had to laugh, she could not help it.

"But it is no laughing matter, Mademoiselle," he returned with a twinkle in his eye: and then he continued more gravely. "It is, believe me, the strongest force we shall ever encounter in this or any other world. Certainly in our day's march here between the cradle and the grave. *Ah ça*," he continued, warming to his theme, "it is also decidedly the most dangerous," and he resumed his operations on the watch-case, "or the most divine, according to the way we look at it."

This pronouncement Matilda received in silence: and as far as the watchmaker could observe seemed to be turning it over in her mind with some degree of perturbation. Sympathetically he marked her downcast air wondering what fresh notion was troubling her. Almost he was inclined

hazard a question, she wore so dispirited a look. But at the instant he was about to plunge into that unknown sea of her reflections she saved him the trouble by speaking for herself.

"But they say it never lasts," she observed wistfully.

Monsieur Le Cheminant was not going to pretend that he did not follow her allusion.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he cried. "What an imbecile notion; fit only for very small minds, Mademoiselle. *Croyez moi*, it lasts forever—the real emotion. I, who am left alone in the world these many years—know. If the sentiment finds itself on the things that matter it lasts forever."

Across Matilda's face a look of relief flitted for a moment, and Monsieur Le Cheminant perceiving this continued his oration.

"*L'amour*," he continued, "that is as immortal as life itself. Some poor souls, it is true, never grasp in what love consists: they have not the vision. It is not, mark you, wanted to all. For some there are, as Moses, who see the fair prospect but enter it not. But oh, la, la, who could have told you such wicked—forgive me, Mademoiselle—is?"

Coming to the end of his fulminations he wiped his forehead with a bright-coloured handkerchief he pulled from one of the capacious pockets in his coat so heated had his eloquence left him.

But Matilda still regarded him with a very uncertain air. "I hope they are wrong," she replied, "for if they are right it makes life hardly worth living I think. But these were people of experience who spoke—both married, with families."

"Still they are mistaken—quite mistaken," returned Monsieur Le Cheminant most firmly.

Attentive as he was to the tristful air his visitor wore he was very anxious to see her less solemn and cheerless: and was casting about for some further argument with which to raise her spirits when once again Matilda took the

conversation into her own hands. She was not one to allow herself to show overmuch despondency to strangers, however kind, for she had not been brought up to expect or desire sympathy from the outside world. So with a sudden change of mood she now faced him.

"You must admit it's all very worrying," she cried. "And sometimes I wish there was no such thing as this falling in love in the world. Especially when I see how cross it makes everyone: and what silly things people seem to do."

"*Tiens*," returned Monsieur Le Cheminant laughing, "we must all agree that it is a very upsetting sentiment: but to worry——"

He shrugged his broad shoulders.

"*Il me semble* that then one handicaps oneself at the very start of the game."

"But people do not seem to be able to help it," returned Matilda in a tone of exasperation that set the watchmaker chuckling once more. "I hate worrying," she added finally.

Monsieur Le Cheminant did not reply to this assertion immediately: it seemed that he was too occupied with some deft and intricate demonstration of the engraver's art to permit his attention to wander then. So Matilda leant back in her chair and once more her gaze returned to the window.

At length after a quite considerable silence the watchmaker straightened himself, and spoke, tugging at his beard.

"Mademoiselle is wise to detest worry; for that is an attitude of mind which cannot help and only weakens. Besides to worry is to age oneself," he went on lightly. "Also it is to give way—and that is again bad for the character."

"Yes," said Matilda.

"Courage and good humour win most battles, I assure you, Mademoiselle."

"I like that idea," said Matilda bringing her gaze once more back into the room: and, as it were, for the moment descending from her watch-tower.

"But above all," continued the watchmaker, falling to work again, "to worry—is to place no reliance in *le Bon Dieu*. Who after all must know his own business perfectly by this time, one would suppose. And who will bring it to its proper fulfilment doubtless at the right moment—no sooner and no later."

This philosophy deeply impressed Matilda and for the first time that afternoon she looked really cheerful to the kind eyes of the Frenchman.

"You think, then," she said, "in the end the best must happen?"

"*Parfaitement*," he replied, "if one has faith."

"And yet," observed Matilda an objection occurring to her, "it doesn't seem always to work out like that."

"No?" said Monsieur Le Cheminant.

Matilda shook her head decidedly.

"What about poor Queen Katherine in the play?" she demanded. "She was a most unselfish character all through—and died so beautifully I could not see the stage for tears in my eyes—and yet King Henry got very tired of her and married Anne Boleyn."

Monsieur Le Cheminant gave to this historical example deep and profound consideration.

"*Si fait*," he replied after some moments, with a laugh. But if he had not—there would have been no Queen Elizabeth. And it appears to me she was one of the greatest rulers that ever sat on the throne of this land."

The point of view contained in his reply was so novel to Matilda that she remained there pondering it silently.

"I see," remarked Monsieur Le Cheminant, "that you have already been to see Henry the Eighth. I, too, was there on the first night."

"Oh," said Matilda, "I never saw you."

To this the watchmaker made answer that it was not surprising for he had been up in the gallery, well behind a pillar, and that although he had been interested to see several of his friends and clients in the more fashionable

parts of the house, for himself, he had been wearing the ring of Gyges.

Matilda was about to ask him what this ring was, not understanding the classical allusion, when a brisk step on the paving stones of the courtyard made her heart beat violently and sent the blood racing to her cheek.

Monsieur Le Cheminant looked up negligently.

"*Tiens*, whom have we here?" he asked. "So *débonnair* and careless——"

Almost before the words were out of his mouth the little cracked door-bell rang: and there entered to them both, dressed in the very latest fashion and wearing an unusually animated expression, the tall figure of the Marquis of Lassington.

Straight up to Matilda he strode.

"You good little thing," he cried, "so you came after all."

And then before she could utter a word, good or bad, he fell back with a look of horror.

"Good gad," he ejaculated, "what have you done to yourself now? You are the strangest little person I ever met."

This sudden attack for the moment completely bewildered Matilda and she remained gazing at him in a puzzled silence.

"Only two nights ago," he continued, "you were like a fairy princess—and today you look as if you had come out of the Ark, itself."

He looked her critically up and down.

"Yes, you are as old-fashioned as—as Noah," he ended aggrievedly.

"I couldn't be that," returned Matilda decidedly, "Noah was a man."

To this the Marquis of Lassington merely returned a laugh so hearty that his hat fell off. He stooped and picked it up; and flung it across the room on to a chair.

"Well—Noah's wife then," he amended: and then he turned to the watchmaker. "And how goes the world with you, Raoul?"

"Tolerably," returned the Frenchman, for him quite easily.

"Did she bring her watch?" continued the Marquis as he marched over to the littered work table.

Monsieur Le Cheminant held it up.

"As you see," he replied. "I am at work on it at this very moment. And Mademoiselle was good enough to say she would wait for it—not being too occupied this afternoon."

But the young man took no notice of his friend's rebuking manner.

"I have an afternoon off too," he remarked with a cheerful nod: and then bringing a chair close to Matilda he sat astride of it and grinned at her over the top bar.

"And how are you, Mrs. Noah?" he demanded. "After your wild dissipation of the night before last. Still upset over the classic drama?"

Matilda returned his teasing look with one of frozen scrutability.

"If it is all the same to you I should prefer to be considered like Mr. Shem's wife," she announced. "If you must imagine me as coming out of the Ark."

"Good gad," said he, "why?"

Matilda tossed her head.

"Mrs. Shem wears larger buttons painted on her," he returned coldly, "so she must have been a more important person: and she had more character, I think."

This remark sent Lord Lassington off again in another hearty burst of laughter which made Matilda if possible more annoyed than before.

"There again," he cried, "you have the oddest mind."

Matilda drew herself up.

"I cannot help that," she retorted, "I did not make my mind."

But at this point in the argument Monsieur Le Cheminant felt it wise to intervene: he could see an increasing coldness about Matilda that boded ill for his new visitor.

"But you are wrong there, Mademoiselle," he began lightly, "if you will allow me to say so: we all form our own minds more or less."

"Singular or not," interjected Lord Lassington.

Matilda turned her back on the irritating young man.

"Have I a singular mind?" she demanded of Monsieur Le Cheminant.

"To have an unusual point of view is a rare thing," began the watchmaker soothingly, "and I am sure Mademoiselle's thoughts are——"

"As old-fashioned as she is," cut in Lord Lassington.

But if he wished to upset Matilda by this criticism he failed. For all she remarked, in answer to it, was that at all events she always knew what she wanted. A bromidic statement that the Marquis professed himself entirely unable to credit: thus again throwing down a gage of battle which to Monsieur Le Cheminant's increasing diversion Matilda was not slow to take up.

"Yes," she returned with sparkling eyes, "whether you believe it or not, I have always known my own mind—always. And I generally get it in the end," she finished candidly.

Lord Lassington balanced his chair precariously on two legs.

"As a matter of fact I know what I want," he said—his dark look passing over Matilda to fix itself, with a concentrated glare of bitterness, on the dozing parrot in its cage. "Although nothing will induce me to believe she does—no woman ever knows what she wants—but can I get what I want? No! Ten thousand times no!"

After this outburst Matilda contemplated him, with tip-tilted chin, from under her lashes.

"For my part I should think you've always had your own way too much," she retorted, with spirit.

"And that's where you are entirely mistaken, Miss Matilda Hope," answered the young man with such harsh energy, that the hitherto peacefully dreaming bird, roused

expectedly by the tremendous force with which he spoke. He raised a sleek head, opened a beady eye, and croaked out to the astonishment of his hearers, "Correct the past, rule the present, see to the future": and retired to the land of naps again.

"Goodness!" cried Matilda.

"Listen to the oracle," said Monsieur Le Cheminant with a laugh.

Lord Lassington withdrew his intent stare from the insolent parrot.

"The bird has sense," he declared, "I'm not sure that I can't take the advice."

Matilda laughed.

"Of course I don't know what is in your mind," she remarked lightly, "but you ought to make a fight for it—you really want it: whatever it is."

With his chin once more supported by the top rung of his chair Lord Lassington blinked at her as though in her immediate vicinity he found the light too blinding.

"What a strong and confident nature is yours," he said: and then turning to the watchmaker he added in awed accents: "Terrific force of character we have here, Raoul." But Matilda passed over the banter scornfully.

"I should fight," she declared.

"And really I believe she would," replied the Marquis, a light of amused admiration dawning in his eyes.

"*Omnia conando docilis solertia vincit*," said Monsieur Cheminant; "And I am sure Mademoiselle has much of

"Or, nothing venture, nothing have," returned Matilda, laughing delightfully at him, and causing Lord Lassington to look more gloomy than ever, in consequence. "Yes, decidedly I should fight for what I wanted," she ended. Lord Lassington rose deliberately from his chair and addressed Matilda.

"Damme, if I don't believe she'd get her own way, too," he muttered and walked over to the window.

"That would be because of my 'apt ability,'" she replied: neatly forestalling what Monsieur Le Cheminant had been about to say.

Lord Lassington swung round on the Frenchman.

"She understands Latin, too," he cried, and turned to gaze stonily at Matilda. "This is a wonder maiden, as Herr Mendelssohn would say," he finished.

Matilda frowned; she was not at all sure that she cared about such open fun being made of her.

"I learnt enough Latin to understand a plain motto like that," she said, "at the Misses Nixon's. You must imagine that I have had a very poor education not to be able to translate a simple Latin phrase."

"And," returned Lord Lassington striding back to his chair as rapidly as he had left it, "the memory being retentive, ready, correct, exact, faithful, and trustworthy——"

Matilda made a gesture of impatience.

"And so much the better for me," she retorted.

Lord Lassington waved an airy hand at her.

"Now don't get huffed," he begged, "let's change the subject." Which he did with a suddenness that left Matilda even a little dizzy. "And how did your serenity get home the other night out of that mob?"

"Quite easily," returned Matilda. "Mr. Francis is an excellent chaperone and understands all about crowds."

A violent facial spasm now seemed to attack the noble Marquis but he conquered it sufficiently to remark blandly that no doubt the eminent solicitor was a highly efficient—dragon. But the word displeased Matilda; whose growing resentment became only more acute as she decided that Lord Lassington was again making fun of her. Not for such ill-timed teasing had she sacrificed her holiday hours.

"I don't like your tone at all," she said slowly, "you are treating me as if I were a baby—instead of a young lady of seventeen."

Affecting to be much moved by this piece of information Lord Lassington bowed solemnly.

"Ah," he exclaimed, "that accounts for it."

Matilda fell into the trap.

"Accounts for what?" she asked.

"The force of character," he returned with an air of precious humility that still further annoyed her. "So great an age——"

But this was more than Matilda could stand calmly.

"Oh," she interrupted him resentfully, "I think you are detestable—what has happened to you? I am not a baby." And she stamped her foot.

Her rising anger did not have the effect she hoped for: or instead of being duly impressed by her bid for a more decorous treatment on his part he burst out laughing.

However, seeing that this only further enraged Matilda he averted his face and replied in muffled tones:

"That's what my godfather called you—a *jolie bébé*."

"Oh," murmured Matilda on a quick breath of surprise; and then she blushed. "But then Monseigneur is old."

"I'll tell him so," swiftly riposted the incorrigible creature facing her, to her dismay.

"Yes," he continued thoughtfully, "he was much impressed by you, Miss Matilda Hope. Of course I don't know what he would say if he could see you now."

"See me now——" repeated Matilda in alarm. "But——" Lord Lassington raised an admonitory finger.

"Yes—see you now in those things. What makes you wear such dreadful clothes?"

Discontentedly he leant far over the back of the chair, at imminent risk of collapsing to the floor, and twitched at the end of her bonnet string.

"And I wanted so much to——" he broke off however decidedly, without ending this sentence, adding, "these dowdy clothes spoil you completely: and you're really rather a pretty little thing."

There was an instant of strained pause: Monsieur Leheminant in the background felt a moment of crisis had been reached.

Deliberately Matilda rose from her chair: and deliberately, with a displeasure that was fairly awe-inspiring it was so ruthless, faced her tormentor. And delivered herself of these words (for this time Lord Lassington had gone too far, much, much too far).

"I regret that you do not find me fashionable, sir: and that, in consequence, you do not care obviously to be seen with me. But you take on yourself too much in assuming that I wish to be seen in your company."

Iceily she viewed the now astounded delinquent who still sat staring up at her with dropped jaw, and who certainly had never anticipated such fiercely offended wrath on Matilda's part. But even then he could not learn wisdom and must rush still farther upon his fate. For with a rueful smile he made answer.

"Sack-cloth, I see, is the only wear."

Up still higher went Matilda's head: more freezing still grew her manner.

"Although you were good enough to save me from an overturned cab two months ago; and we have met on a couple of occasions since——"

"Today makes the third—no, the fourth," he interrupted briskly. "All stimulating meetings."

"I cannot see," continued Matilda brushing aside his remark, "that these circumstances give you the slightest right to assume so familiar an attitude."

"But if you could only see yourself," he muttered stubbornly.

"I have no wish to," returned Matilda; and she moved a step or two nearer to the impenitent wretch in order to be certain that her next utterances should be absolutely clear to him. "I came here today at your request——"

"I know it," said he.

"Because you informed me the other evening that you had an important piece of news to communicate to me. Now—I begin to believe you were not speaking the truth. In any case," said Matilda staring him down, "I regret I

"I shall not be able to hear it now: I have wasted too much time as it is. And should we meet again I must beg that you will be courteous enough to keep your opinions as to my dress to yourself."

Without pausing to note what impression, if any, this sequence made on the culprit she literally swept to the door, the picture in miniature of outraged pride: for she was very angry. At the door she turned gravely to the silent but observant watchmaker.

"I will come back for my watch another day, Monsieur," she said sweetly. "I know it is safe in your hands."

And inclining her head unsmilingly she passed out into the courtyard.

In utter silence both men watched her cross the sunlit space rapidly, her head well in the air, and looking neither to the right nor to the left, until she disappeared from sight.

"*Mon Dieu*," cried the watchmaker, when the last flutter of her slate-coloured crinoline had vanished. "There goes a charming little fury."

Lord Lassington sank back into the chair Matilda had so impetuously vacated.

"By gad," said he, staring at his boots sombrely, "I put my foot in it that time. All the same she does dress awfully well," he reiterated, sticking to his artillery, "you could have seen her the first day I ever met her."

He raised expressive eyes to Heaven as calling it to witness to the truth of his statement: appreciatively Monsieur Le Cheminant smiled, stroking his beard meditatively.

"Who then is—Mademoiselle?" he asked: but this it turned out was exactly what Lord Lassington did not know. And by the time he had explained the entire history of his acquaintance with Matilda, the watchmaker was not much the wiser for the recital. So much important information was lacking: as for instance where she lived, or who she

"But she's a perfect little pepper pot," finished Lord Lassington with deep conviction.

Monsieur Le Cheminant regarded his young friend consideringly.

"Possibly as well she should be—as things are," he said, "and altogether fortunate you do not know where she lives: for I perceive that you are on the verge of ill-considered and impulsive actions, *mon cher*."

Lord Lassington shrugged his shoulders.

"I dare say it is all for the best," he said, "but if she had not got in such a temper—and now I don't even know where she lives."

He rose and marching discontentedly up and down the shop at last came to a stand by the watchmaker.

"Anyway I know her name," he finished.

"Ah," said Monsieur le Cheminant, and he tapped Matilda's watch with his burin. "M.H.H.—those are her initials."

"Matilda Hope," returned Lord Lassington lingering on the words as though they evoked pleasant reflections.

"And the second 'H'? What does that stand for?"

"The second 'H'?" repeated the Marquis in a puzzled voice.

"Yes," said Monsieur Le Cheminant firmly.

"Are you sure?"

"Perfectly."

For the second time Lord Lassington shrugged his shoulders: in silence he fetched his hat and in silence he put it on.

"Blest if I know," he said at last. "She gets more mysterious every time I see her and more—fascinating," he ended with a wry smile.

And a moment later Monsieur Le Cheminant and Riquette were once more left in solitude.

CHAPTER XIV

DESCRIBES HOW MATILDA MET A RECENT ACQUAINTANCE
IN ST. JAMES'S PARK AND HOW SHE ENCOUNTERED
A MUCH DISCUSSED ADMIRER OF LADY VICTORIA'S
ON ONE AND THE SAME MORNING

MILK FAIR, in St. James's Park, was in the year of Matilda's coming to London, as it was for many a long day after, one of the most unique and picturesque sights in Town. For it was a popular rendezvous for all those who wished to taste the delights of a rural life—as far at least as drinking a glass of fresh milk still warm from the very cow herself was concerned. For the modest sum of twopence a class the genial, shawled and aproned milk-women purveyed their wares—sometimes even under Royal patronage itself—to all and sundry. And would at the whim of a young customer milk equally accommodately either the gentle prindle or the more enquiring Polly, according as the one or other, for the time being, assumed the position of favourite in the popular demand.

Amongst the children of the well-to-do, no less than their less fortunate brothers, Milk Fair was something of an institution. And regular indeed was the attendance of many a small person destined in after days to take no slight part in the ruling of his country.

Here repaired, then, once a week—by order of his august mama—that independent and spirited male, Lord George English, in the company of Matilda: and more often than not accompanied by the exuberant Ladies Caroline and Charlotte. Here it was his duty to partake of a glass of that beverage with which the infant is first made

acquainted, and to which he returns at the end of his life's journey. This ceremony, excellent though it was, unfortunately was one that Lord George detested from the very bottom of his heart. And that there was no getting away from it on the score of distaste, by reason of its being a settled conviction of his mother's that milk fresh from the cow was extraordinarily good for little boys, was a very sore point with him. Milk at meals, and in the house, Lord George could perceive to be a disagreeable necessity. But to put on your hat and coat and go out of doors in search of the vapid mixture seemed to him the height of grown-up imbecility.

Therefore on the morning of the day on which the Duchess of Westmainham was to give her masked ball at Tilney House her youngest son awoke in a far from pleasant humour. For it rushed at once into his mind, his eyes being yet barely open, that this was the detested day of the week on which Matilda took the field with him as it were, and manœuvred him to that terrain of all others the most profoundly hateful in the world to him, there to make him drink the fluid he most loathed—next to water. One can observe here with interest that Lord George's tastes did not run in any way to prohibition. Indeed, in after years he was to become something of a celebrity amongst the cognoscenti for his nice discrimination in the matter of wines and vintages. To him a perfect wine was almost as amazing a work of Providence as a beautiful woman. And for those who abused either gift he had little patience and less time. But at this date he was too young to do more than register a solemn vow in his small head that in days to come he would, once and for all, abandon milk as a drink: a vow he kept. Always, on reaching adolescence, imbibing his coffee black and taking lemon in his tea, *à la Russe*.

On this June morning, Tilney House being a mere vortex of decorators, ladders, wreaths, smilax, pastry-cooks and red carpet, Matilda took an early opportunity of leaving its activities behind her; and thankfully relinquishing the

naperonage of the Ladies Caroline and Charlotte to the bod-natured Hortense temporarily, issued forth from the mansion with their recalcitrant brother. Not without attention either did she sally forth at such an early hour. For, in a weak moment and to keep him quiet, she had promised Lord George (time permitting) to take him to St. James's Palace to see the Guard changed, a very favourite diversion of his; and, if possible, to hear the military band play in the courtyard facing Marlborough House. Always providing that his conduct for the whole morning was unimpeachable.

On this understanding, therefore, he proceeded amiably enough with her across the Park, chattering volubly from the instant the front door was shut behind them: and crossing over Constitution Hill by the statue of the old Duke of Wellington he for once positively hurried Matilda to the usually execrated spot where he was destined to improve his health, if not his moral sense, by imbibing as rapidly as possible a whole glass of Brindle's immaculate beverage. Matilda, her bright eyes fastened upon Lord George for any sign of waywardness on his part, saw with much satisfaction the absolutely faultless manner in which he gulped down the tonic draught.

"Splendid," said she, "I wish you always drank it with as much relish."

Lord George, his glass still in his hand, confronted her steadily.

"When I am grown up," he said, "I thall only drink port, like Mr. Bartie. And perhaps ale thometimes—mild ale."

And he returned his empty glass to the wooden counter placing it thereon with such a thump as nearly cracked it.

"Oh, be careful," admonished Matilda; and after paying the required twopence to the smiling custodian, followed Lord George to the stalls behind the booth: whither he had trotted in that precise little military way of his to inspect his "own stupid cow" as he had dubbed the pensive Brindle who never seemed to do anything but chew very

uninterestedly the cud and her own reflections at the same time.

"Yes," he continued, contemplating the lack-lustre eye of the creature, "when I'm grown up I thertainly won't have anything more to do with cows at all. Thilly animals."

And he turned away with an air of disgust.

"You won't be grown up for a long time," returned Matilda as she took him by the hand preparatory to resuming their morning stroll.

Lord George made some rapid calculations in an undertone.

"When you are thirty and quite old," he announced in a tone of regret, "I thall be nineteen, little Horthey. And I thall wear long whiskers and perhaps a beard like Grospapa Antoine. And," he added after a moment's deep cogitation and skipping up and down on the path before her, "I fink I thall come and call on you on Thursdays."

Matilda looked sidelong down at him and laughed: unable to follow his process of thought with any degree of clarity.

"Oh, will you," she said, "you bearded wonder. Perhaps I shall not be at home."

This was a blow for Lord George who was about to sketch out a complete ceremonial to be observed by both himself and Matilda on these Thursdays; but he recovered himself rapidly, and regarding her with a most sapient and old-fashioned expression on his face, stopped dead in the middle of the pathways to say:

"Yeth, you will, a little bird told me you'd be home. Becauth you'll have six little boyths then."

Matilda was extremely impressed by this entering of the prophetical ranks on the part of Lord George.

"Goodness," she cried, and then added with a laugh, "Am I to have no girls?"

"Not one," returned Lord George inexorably. "Six little boyths—like me."

This was a stirring prospect indeed and once again Matilda laughed.

"But whatever should I call them?" she asked helplessly.

This problem however presented no kind of difficulty to the inventive genius of Lord George.

"Matthew—Mark—Luke—and John," he returned promptly, "that's four, nice, short names."

On hearing this almost standardized idea of nomenclature a curious expression flickered in Matilda's eyes, an expression that decidedly intrigued Lord George, but as she said nothing he went on.

"And the fifth will be George, after me. And he need never drink milk if he doesn't want to."

"Ah," replied Matilda, "I'm not so sure about that. And the sixth name?" she demanded: and much to Lord George's astonishment, who could see no reason for such merriment in anything he was saying, went off into another fit of laughter.

Sturdily the philosopher stepped along by her side and gave a careful consideration to the question. And, after some close thought on the subject generally, spoke again.

"I think Goliath would be a splendid name," he said.

Matilda stopped dead in the middle of the pathway.

"Goliath," she returned in firm tones, "would be quite impossible. A giant killed by a little stone—no, certainly not."

Her reception of his suggestion being so cool, although Lord George felt her opposition to be a pity, for personally the name attracted him enormously, he yet was anxious to demonstrate his reasonableness in the matter; he therefore retired into himself once more there to commune with himself. However, his thoughts evidently ran along Biblical lines for the next instant he was suggesting that the last phantom child should be called after that man who knocked down a whole lot of walls once.

"Joshua," said Matilda doubtfully, "I don't care about that name either; and why must they have Bible names?"

Lord George hastened to rectify his blunder.

"They needn't," he returned, "this one can be called Timothy."

"That's in the New Testament," promptly objected Matilda. "But he'll have to do—and anyway, he drank wine; which will please you, George."

Lord George fairly beamed on hearing this.

"That's two, then, that don't need milk," he said in a satisfied tone: and as by this time they had reached in their wanderings the old red brick palace, and the courtyard which was their goal, in the excitement of getting in to a front row of the little crowd of people already assembled there to listen to the music Lord George abandoned any further attempts at naming this future family of Matilda's, giving himself up entirely to the enjoyment of the moment. Eagerly his eyes followed the movements of the little group of officers carrying the Colour, as they paced slowly up and down the courtyard. Suddenly he recognized a familiar face among them.

"That's Sir John," he declared in a loud and penetrating tone, tugging at Matilda's hand to attract her attention. "But he won't look at me now."

The magnificent person he pointed out so particularly was at that exact moment moving with measured pace away from them: and, unless he possessed eyes in the back of his head was in no position to do so. But he had heard the child's remark evidently, for on his return he searched quite openly for the unknown speaker in the watching and listening crowd: and finding Lord George standing there upright and sturdy, his Glengarry rakishly pushed to one side, endowed him with a glance of amused recognition: a glance which Lord George returned with a broad smile and a wave of his hand.

So that was Lady Victoria's discarded sweetheart, Matilda mused as she watched his tall and well set up figure pace up and down with military precision. And having seen him she no longer wondered at the affection which Lady Victoria professed to feel for him. A typical

soldier—he had that genial and kindly air that so many a man who follows the profession of arms exhibits. Besides he was decidedly handsome.

“He can’t thmle,” explained Lord George, not so confidentially but that those nearest him heard and smiled at his words, “becauth he’s on duty.”

This interesting piece of information also penetrated to the little group escorting the Colour: and Matilda fearing what further revelation might strike Lord George as worthy of publication deemed it the moment to restrain his comments.

“Oh, hush,” she rebuked, “you mustn’t make yourself conspicuous. A well-bred little gentleman never makes personal remarks of any kind.”

“I’m not making personal remarks,” returned Lord George most placidly, “I am only explaining things to you, Horthey dear, becauth you have lived in the country all your life.”

With a crash of brass and a roll of drums the march played by the band reached its conclusion as Matilda took out her watch.

“We must be getting home,” she said, “it will be past twelve before we reach Tilney House, at this rate.”

And in spite of his coaxing and earnest endeavours to detain her for “just one more piece,” Matilda hardened her heart and firmly led Lord George away from his ever beloved soldiers; his wistful backward glances notwithstanding.

But the resiliency of childhood being one of the most remarkable things about it, Lord George soon recovered from the depression consequent on his being torn away so ruthlessly from the military spectacle when he was at the height of his enjoyment of it: and still in the most holiday of humours, pleased with themselves and the world, Matilda and he took their way amiably along the Mall and into the Green Park together. Chatting as they went briskly on any subject that came uppermost: as for instance why Lord George had of late abandoned his design to be a writer of

books and was now more inclined to the open-air career of an engine driver. For which indeed Matilda found him advancing many striking reasons.

Thus progressing entirely at their leisure, and deep in their conversation, across the grassy spaces of the park they were equally startled and astonished to be confronted suddenly and most unexpectedly by Matilda's new acquaintance, the old Duc de Lorgny. Who, it seemed, was also taking a morning constitutional.

"*Eh bien,*" he cried, thrusting at the small boy with his gold-headed cane, "thou art going to cut me, art thou?"

With a loud and joyful cry Lord George hurled himself at the newcomer.

"Grosppapa Antoine," he cried, "it is my Grosppapa Antoine."

Heartily the old gentleman embraced Lord George and then turned courteously to Matilda.

"And how goes the world with you, Mademoiselle?" he asked smiling down upon her. "But I needn't enquire," he added as Matilda made her curtsy, "for you look as blooming as the day itself."

"Little Horthey and I have been lithening to the band," volunteered Lord George. "Becauth I drank my milk like a good boy."

"I compliment you," returned the Duc, "on the excellence of your behaviour."

And then he turned to Matilda again.

"And where are you drifting now?" he asked.

"I am taking Lord George home," replied Matilda. "I am afraid we've been out almost too long," and she took out her watch and consulted it again.

But it seemed the old gentleman was in no mind to let them leave him so quickly for he had nothing very much to do and was minded to improve his acquaintance with Matilda.

"It is so beautiful a morning," he urged, "do not hurry my little friend there into an airless schoolroom. I will

take the responsibility of detaining you yet a little. Come, let us all three sit under those trees yonder," he indicated a group near by, "I have not seen this mannikin for days and we are good friends, eh, *vieux grognard*?"

Affectionately Lord George looked up and nodding slipped a hand into the old man's.

"Besides," continued the Duc graciously, "I also should like to make your better acquaintance, Mademoiselle, if you will permit."

Conscious that this request, graceful as it was, was tantamount to a command, Matilda could only submit as cheerfully as possible to the Duc's wish; hoping privately that she might not be missed in the general busy confusion being manifested at Tilney House that morning. For well she knew Her Grace would not be too pleased at her over-long absence should it be brought to her notice; and, further, she had her doubts as to whether the Duchess would accept the Duc's suggestion of assuming all responsibility in the matter. However, as she saw no way out she complied with as good a grace as possible with the old gentleman's desire; and in step, and in formation as near the front line alignment of the Guards Band as Lord George could make it they changed direction, and leaving the path, moved across the grass till they came to a halt under a clump of trees where three green chairs stood waiting for them. Here they all three sat down; Matilda and Lord George side by side facing the old Frenchman, who hitched his seat round till he could command a good view of both young faces.

"And have you seen your old friend Mr. Francis, lately?" he began: fixing his eyeglass in his eye and contemplating Matilda in her fresh green linen frock and ribbon-trimmed straw bonnet as though the vision pleased him mightily.

"Not since the night he took me to see Mr. and Mrs. Charles Kean," returned Matilda. "That was a wonderful evening. It must be a great thing to have as much talent as they have."

"The actor," returned the Duc thoughtfully, "the true actor I begin to believe, must have a vocation—much like a religious."

But as this pronouncement did not convey very much to Matilda, whose complete ignorance of the histrionic art and its exponents was abysmal, she refrained from discussing the assertion. Thereby showing a touch of wisdom beyond her years; and leaving the Duc to elaborate his theme should he so wish.

"Yes, the player must be master of a very complete and difficult technique," he continued. "To hold the mirror up to nature is no easy task. Very special gifts of intelligence and quickness of perception are needed."

To this Matilda, remembering the effect on her of her first introduction to this art, felt herself at least able to agree.

"Character building, as the player depicts it in his rôles, needs a lifetime of study."

Again Matilda nodded thoughtfully.

"I wonder if I should have liked to be an actress," she said.

The Duc smiled a little ruefully.

"I was just about to say—the Lord forbid!" he answered. "And yet that is a totally wrong point of view. For if the world ostracizes and contemns a whole class—to whom mankind is much indebted, mark you—what hope is there of a great drama, or a happy, self-respecting set of people engaged in producing it? And yet for a woman, as things go, Mademoiselle, such a career too often means a broken life, or heart."

Sombrely he looked away across the grass; and Lord George, conscious of a change in the mood of his admired Grosppapa, slipped down from his chair and went to lean against his knee.

"It is better not to leave the right harbour—if one has the good fortune to be born into it—if I may so express it, than to voyage in search of the most definite of vocations."

"Yes," assented Matilda with a sigh; her thoughts flitting

at once to Lady Victoria. She was almost sorry that that fanciful little lady could not be present to listen to such excellent advice.

"Then again," continued the Duc meditatively, "it takes a very great deal of courage to withstand one's family—who too often are strongly opposed to a life of artistic toil and endeavour. The idea of the player as a rogue and a vagabond dies hard. Too rarely we know is the prophet honoured in his own circle: too much familiarity having bred, if not contempt, at least disbelief."

"That seems a pity," said Matilda decidedly.

The Duc nodded.

"More—a tragedy," he returned, and then he stroked his beard in silence for a moment or two, watched enquiringly by Lord George.

"I am beginning to wonder now that I am an old man, and look at life so much in retrospect, how many men and women lose their way," he said at last, "and find their lives and talents crushed, yes, devastated even, by the blind and stubborn determination of those who should be nearest and dearest to them to frustrate their efforts. Efforts so often misunderstood. And so the poor souls become, as your great poet puts it, 'mute, inglorious Hampdens,'—and life is only a bitter thing, *à la fin*."

Matilda regarded the speaker a little uncertainly: for frankly she had not the slightest notion what the Duc was talking about. But wrapped in a mantle of sombre reflections the Duc still continued to develop his theme to an utterly uncomprehending audience.

"Too often in a foolish respect for the conventional and one's own pride, one takes the wrong road in dealing with a difficulty—or a determination," he paused for a moment and added in a low tone, almost to himself, "and, alas, one visits on the innocent what one is pleased to call the sins of the fathers."

"But that's in the Bible," said Matilda.

"Quite so," returned the Duc mildly, "but I think you

will find that the Almighty alone has the right to use that power. We poor, erring mortals have, I think, nowhere been given permission to arrogate to ourselves the attributes of the All-Wise."

"Oh," said Matilda.

"But," continued the Duc smiling at her, "this must be all too difficult for your pretty little head, Mademoiselle—yet you will understand me possibly, when I say that sometimes one can rate one's family pride too high."

"That," returned Matilda slowly, "I should never be able to do. For I have no family—I am quite alone in the world."

It was at this point in the conversation that Lord George, who had up till then been listening intently to the voice of his idol, decided to take a hand himself. Comfortably leaning against the old gentleman he observed in tones of the deepest admiration:

"I do love to hear you talk, Grospapa—you use such beautiful long words."

And then, not waiting for any acknowledgment of this handsome tribute, and with a complete change of subject, he waved a hand at Matilda and continued earnestly:

"I don't mind little Horthey having no family; I love her, and when I'm grown up she's going to be in my house forever."

"The determination does you great credit," observed the Duc approvingly: and he looked from Lord George to Matilda with a very kindly expression on his hawklike features.

"Your parents then—are dead, Mademoiselle?" he asked her softly.

"Yes," she returned, "I have always understood they died when I was a very little girl."

"Pity," said Lord George.

"And you possess no other relatives?"

Matilda shook her head and in spite of her efforts to remain unconcerned her eyes grew wistful.

"No, not a soul, so I have been informed," she answered, "and Mr. Francis is the only friend I have, too. Because I don't really think I can count my godfather you know."

The Duc de Lorgny casually shifted his glance from Matilda to the figure of Lord George, who, having tired of so much inaction, was now to his own complete satisfaction capering about in the sunshine with the old man's gold-headed cane.

"You have a godfather then?" he demanded carelessly.

Matilda, her eyes also on Lord George and his manœuvres which seemed to her to threaten disaster in the near future, nodded absently.

"And this godfather?" pursued the Duc giving his moustache a fierce twist, "you do not count him as a friend, then?"

"Well it would be rather difficult to," she explained, meeting his glance frankly. "For you see I do not know who he is."

"*Tiens*," said the Duc.

And again, as on another occasion, Matilda in order this time to explain the odd situation in which she found herself, recited the conditions under which she had been brought up: on which this singular godfather of hers had so firmly insisted.

"He was never to be bothered with me—either writing or wanting to see him at any time—in consideration of which I, being an orphan, he was prepared to maintain and educate me till I was of an age to support myself."

This eloquence had a very strange effect on the Duc who stared at Matilda for some seconds without replying.

"*Mon Dieu*," he cried at last, "it would seem that you have learnt those words off by heart. Surely it was a mistake to teach you such harsh conditions."

"Also his residence is not in this country," ended Matilda placidly.

Again there was a silence.

"And I suppose you hate him," observed the Duc finally in a low tone: but this Matilda would not allow.

"No, I don't think so," she returned, shrugging her shoulders in that half foreign way of hers—just as she had in Mr. Francis's office more than two months previously. "I dare say he's a horrid old man," she admitted candidly, "but Mr. Francis said he was one of the handsomest men of his day. And so probably he's always had his own way and been very spoilt."

This touch of philosophy openly amused the old Frenchman.

"Although you are very young to show such understanding," he smiled.

"I like to be just," explained Matilda, "and after all he has never seen me."

Then once again, as she had two months before, for it was a settled conviction with her, she remarked:

"Best let sleeping dogs lie."

But if the effect of these words on Mr. Francis had been one of pure distress, certainly on his distinguished client they had an entirely different effect. For somewhat to Matilda's surprise who could see no very great humour in them, the Duc laughed so immoderately that the tears came into his eyes.

"*Mort de ma vie*—a philosopher of the rarest kind," whilst another spasm shook him.

Silently Matilda watched him not at all understanding his poignant mirth.

"Then you are quite content as you are—and not ambitious?" he demanded: when having wiped both his eyes and his eye-glass with his handkerchief he became his wonted grave and courtly self again.

After a careful consideration Matilda made reply.

"No," said she, "now that I have my watch and a fringed sunshade and no less than two ball dresses I should be very ungrateful if I were not content; besides he kept his part of the bargain—now I must keep mine."

Cheerfully she nodded at him as one who sees nothing whatever to deplore in the decrees of Fate. But to this view the Duc surprisingly opposed a firm contradiction.

"No bargain that—," he pointed out. "It was a condition and a very hard one imposed on you when you were far too young exactly to understand what it implied. A very unjust condition surely."

But from whatever motive he spoke, of passing sympathy and interest in so courageous a little person as Matilda showed herself to be in his eyes, he could not prevail on her to envisage the affair as he did; or change her point of view in any way. Still to his unaffected amusement she continued to find excuses for her negligent godfather.

"I may have been a wretched little nuisance as a baby," she argued. "Children are often very troublesome."

Involuntarily her look strayed to the distant madly gyrating figure of Lord George.

"No, he was under no obligation to have me to live with him. Also he may have been an old bachelor: they so often dislike children. And I dare say I shall do very well," she ended stoutly.

And in spite of the Duc's continuing to shake his head and remark, now a little heatedly, that at least her godfather's conduct showed a distinct want of heart, Matilda did not change one iota from her attitude of serene acceptance of things as they were. On the contrary, taken with a spirit of mischief, for every fresh point that the old gentleman advanced against her capricious spiritual relative, Matilda now put forward a fresh excuse for him. Till at last the Duc had to give up the discussion in despair. One last effort, however, he did make.

"*Mon Dieu*," he cried quite testily, "can you not see how heartless it all was? Here are you a young creature forced to be alone in the world—knowing nothing of your kin. Or you must possess relatives: there never was anybody, born on the earth, entirely independent of a family connection."

He paused to stare irritably all round him and away into the distance, where along the horizon the houses in Piccadilly rose above the treetops, almost as though he expected at any moment some straying relative of Matilda might appear above the tussocks of grass, and wave friendly greeting to her.

"Think what you are missing," he said. "Why not give this godfather a chance to behave rationally?"

"No, I couldn't approach him," returned Matilda firmly. "Mr. Francis would never permit me to do such a thing. Besides you know I expect my family was one of the quarrelling kind that are always cutting each other off——"

"*Pas possible!*" said the Duc with a look of horror.

"Some families do, you know," continued Matilda pleasantly. "It's their one real excitement—a kind of hobby like stamp collecting."

"What a very singular idea."

"Yes," went on Matilda, warming to her subject, "the Misses Nixon were a little like that, at times. They had Irish blood in them—so that accounted for it. But of course they always had wonderful reconciliations—when people got married you know, or anyone was born in their family——"

"Indeed," said the Duc.

"And then they asked the ones they had quarrelled with to tea."

"A very remarkable proceeding," commented the old Frenchman regarding Matilda with a quizzical eye. Lightly Matilda laughed, as her mind went back to well-remembered occasions when warring parties had smoked the pipe of peace, as it were, in the sedate drawing-room on the ground floor of the Swallow's Nest in dubiously armed neutrality.

"To my mind it was a pity they did not save their breath, as old Silas used to say, to cool their porridge. There always seemed to be such silly reasons for these battles," said Matilda thoughtfully.

"Most reasons seem—foolish," returned the Duc, "when

the one with whom these petty disagreements have been pushed to the extreme point is—dead. Nothing can excuse such short-sighted giving way to trivially base emotions.”

His tone had become so solemn and he sighed so heavily that Matilda felt as if she had unexpectedly become acquainted with a tragedy that had for him no end; and, in some way also, almost seemed to concern her. Though that was of course fanciful and ridiculous.

“But to retrace one’s steps—much as one may desire to—is not always possible, *hélas*.”

Matilda was just about to turn to the Duc when a shrill and terrible wail from Lord George, for the time being forgotten, sent her racing from her seat, her bonnet strings flying, her crinoline swaying in the morning breeze. More composedly, and with a hint of amusement in his air, the old man followed her.

“Oh, oh,” cried that doughty warrior Lord George as he hurried up to him to find him a tumbled heap on the grass, “my train had an accident just as it was coming into the station; and I believe, little Horthey, I’ve cracked my ankle in two. What will Mama say?”

Apprehensively he clutched at Matilda as she knelt by him to make a careful examination of his injuries; not so alarmed by the news as she might have been, for these ups and downs of life where Lord George was concerned were nothing out of the common. A moment’s survey showed both her and the Duc that nothing very serious had happened. So making light of his bruises she rubbed the abraded part briskly, and bade Lord George recollect that little men never shed tears. Thus exhorted the invalid pulled himself sternly together and, drying his eyes, replaced on his head his Glengarry which had fallen to the ground, and rose to his feet; and, after shaking himself violently to make quite sure that no bones had been broken in any part of his anatomy, professed himself “all right” again.

At Matilda’s bidding he returned very regretfully the borrowed stick, the cause of the untoward accident, to its

rightful owner; and prepared to bid the Duc an affectionate farewell, also at Matilda's desire.

"For I think," she ventured, "if I am permitted by Your Grace, I should take Lord George home now."

This time permission was most graciously accorded her and Lord George solemnly endowing the Duc with first kiss and then a military salute of the most meticulous kind. Matilda, making in her turn her little curtsey, took her pupil by the hand to lead him away.

"So you do not wish to make the acquaintance of this mysterious godfather?" enquired the Duc, reverting to an earlier subject, as he detained Matilda for a moment to take her by the hand and greatly to her amazement raised it ceremoniously to his lips. Much to her confusion it must be admitted, for the salute almost seemed like a caress. Though that was absurd too, Matilda reflected, for well she knew that foreigners always kissed people's hands; on the other side of the Channel it was a most ordinary action.

But although his tone appeared to hint at a greater importance than his rather careless words seemed to imply for the life of her Matilda could think of no other answer to give him than the one she had made before. To her it placed the whole affair in a nutshell.

"Best let sleeping dogs lie," repeated Matilda.

And left it at that.

Having parted amicably enough from her new and exalted acquaintance she now briskly wended her way homewards with the chattering Lord George. But she was to meet with one more delay before she reached Tilney House again. For striding towards them just as they reached the pavement before Apsley House, came the tall figure of the Guards officer Lord George had pointed out to Matilda as Sir John Marlow: and his eyes falling on that irrepressible person, who at the moment was frisking round her skirts very much like an energetic puppy, he stopped and caught him up demanding to know why he had run away before the band had played "God Save the Queen"?

"Becaith" replied the child, tranquilly surveying the world and his friend from this new eminence, "little Horthey said I was to."

"Reason enough," returned Sir John, "if this is Miss Morsey?" and he saluted Matilda.

"And we're very late now," continued Lord George calmly. "And Torie has a ball tonight and everybody hath to wear mathks."

This piece of information Sir John received with a boyish grin, poking his informant in the ribs till he emitted a shrill squeal of protest.

"Amazing," said Sir John. "And very handy. Shall I see you there?"

To this the child shook his head sadly.

"I should like to have worn a mathk like a bull, but Furth Croth thed I was too little to go," he confessed.

Sir John laughed.

"I think I had better go in that character," he remarked. A bull in a china shop—that would have all the elements of excitement about it, at least."

"Shall I tell Torie you are coming?" queried Lord George.

Sir John nodded. "If you like," he said.

Gravely Lord George bent his eyes on the young officer's face.

"Why haven't you been to thee uth for so long?" he demanded.

Gloomily Sir John set him on the pavement and replied:

"Because the Fates were against it. In fact I'm entirely out of luck."

This saying obviously puzzled its recipient.

"Who ith the Fates?" he enquired.

That Sir John found a good deal of difficulty in replying was evident to Matilda; for first he frowned heavily and then he gave utterance to an impatient sigh.

"At the present moment, as far as I am concerned," he answered, "Torie and one other most important person stand in the position of Fates to me."

This explanation Lord George received with profound gravity partly because he could not understand it, but mainly because he felt that Sir John was treating him not as a mere and negligible small boy but as he might have been little "Horthey" herself, or his particular pet aversion—Hortense.

"If only Torie could make up her mind," added the disconsolate swain dejectedly.

"Frederick thays Torie has no mind to make up," shrewdly suggested her young relative.

This announcement had the effect of making Sir John smile delightedly; for as he had never been under any misapprehension as to the calibre of his sweetheart's mentality he could well appreciate the thrust. Not in vain had he been her faithful slave from a lanky lad. And devoted as he undoubtedly was to the delightful little lady he yet could very acutely estimate what part emotional caprice might play in her life: and how little reason would weigh with her at such a crisis.

"So that's what Frederick said, did he?" he laughed. "And sometimes I almost believe he's right."

With that he saluted Matilda most punctiliously, and pulling Lord George's cap, to his intense indignation, well over his eyes—with a final valedictory, "keep your pecker up" to that incensed male—he resumed his way along Piccadilly. Head well up and shoulders square to the world—the perfect embodiment of a handsome and soldierly young man.

From Lord George however proceeded sounds the reverse of delighted.

"Look what he's done now," he cried in passionate but muffled accents to Matilda, struggling with his headgear. "And he's too far for me to run after him and kick him."

He launched so savage a look in the direction of the swiftly retreating Sir John that Matilda aghast at such truculence caught him by the arm.

"Gracious," she cried, "you are behaving like a little heathen, George, I'm surprised at you."

Lord George reset his cap at the angle which pleased him best.

"I'm getting very hungry," he returned in extenuation of his savage aspirations. "And well he knows I hate my hair rumpled up when I'm out."

CHAPTER XV

TELLS OF THE STRANGE HAPPENINGS AT THE TILNEY HOUSE MASKED BALL: AND OF MATILDA'S FIRST KISS

THE hour of ten o'clock on Wednesday night, the sixth of June, found Tilney House, as also its immediate neighbourhood, in a state of the most profound excitement. The mild air of the summer evening, in the vicinity, was fairly alive with the sound of wheels and the ring of iron shoes and hooves; which taken together with the ever increasing hum of voices rising from the crowd of onlookers that lined the pavements to quiz the occupants of the long lines of carriages and cabs making their slow way into the courtyard, in order to deposit under its portico their lovely burdens of masked guests, showed that the great hour was approaching of Matilda's wistful dreams.

To the alertly straining eyes of the bystanders congregated round the very gates of the historic mansion fascinating glimpses of lovely *débutantes*, and more gorgeous dowagers, or gleaming decorations on manly chests were to furnish food for a month's conversation thereafter, at the very least. And with every passing second popular enthusiasm for the pageantry grew.

In the courtyard itself, a continuous stream of vehicles set down their loads of the celebrated, the high born, or the merely wealthy.

The arrival of Vicountess Palmerston was greeted with a cheer; but the hurrying, tall figure of Mr. Charles Dickens—who left his cab some way down the street to finish his journey on foot—for once passed unremarked. Possibly because it almost coincided with the coming of the old

Duchess of Cambridge accompanied by the blooming and popular Princess Mary, destined to be in after years the mother of a Queen of England. Such a burst of applause greeted them as even reached Matilda sitting alone and far away in her quiet schoolroom. For here was the only spot in the house where the universal gaiety of the evening had not penetrated: and here remained Matilda solitary, but determined in her industry, and engaged on her everlasting task of mending torn garments belonging to the Ladies Caroline and Charlotte. Stitching away for dear life she shut her ears resolutely to the distracting snatches of popular dance music which floated in continually at the open window. Not even the Ladies Charlotte or Caroline could have prevailed on her to take the briefest peep at the festive scene belowstairs; even from so high an eyrie as the very top landing of Tilney House. For within her gentle soul wave after wave of passionate longing to be able to go downstairs as one of the guests was drowning her wonted content of mind completely. Too well did she know how much she would have given to put on her pink ball dress; and, more, she was very well aware with whom it was she so much desired to dance. All wrong, very wrong—we are not defending Matilda; still she was but seventeen. However it was quite beyond her strength for her to venture forth for even a stray sight of the fashionable crowd which was now fast filling the state apartments of Tilney House.

Her tray of supper she left untasted as her appetite, perhaps not very surprisingly, had entirely failed her.

Once only, like a little grey ghost, she flitted shamefacedly from her post; and hurrying to her bedroom, lit a candle, and took tenderly from the wardrobe her rose-coloured gown; gazing long and earnestly upon its beauties.

“What a pity—poor little dress,” she murmured softly at last as she hung it up again; and, after blowing out the candle, returned to her old seat in the schoolroom window there once more to take up her sewing.

To her therefore—when round about ten o'clock—Hortense entered full of picturesque descriptions of gallant uniforms and bejewelled dresses Matilda gave but a very perfunctory attention. For, candidly, she found her conversation upsetting to the last degree. Of what use these scenes of delight and charm if she could never hope to share in them? And she was almost on the point of remarking, a shade bitterly, as much when Hortense uttered the sentence, voiced the fatal phrase, which set in Matilda's path the greatest temptation she had ever known in her life.

It was such a careless sentence too. Or, remembering it afterwards, was it?

"Look you, *chérie*, what I have here," was all she said: and at the same time dangled in front of Matilda's eyes a small dark object.

Idly Matilda regarded it at first: and then when she realized what Hortense was holding up for her inspection her heart gave a great bound.

For it was a small black satin mask—deeply edged with Chantilly lace.

"See," continued Hortense leaning against the window and beating time to the music with a careless forefinger, "see you, Milady Victoria must needs have for her own purpose a mask without a lace flounce—so here is one that has no owner."

Again she dangled the provocative thing by its ribbons.

"A pity there is no one to wear it," she repeated and her glance sought Matilda's who, not daring to reply, continued to sew with bent head.

"I suppose," she faltered, after a pause in which Hortense made no effort to break the silence, "that dancing has begun some time."

Hortense nodded.

"And Milady Victoria I hear is behaving with a capriciousness that is detestable."

Matilda raised her head and let her work drop into her lap.

"She is dancing with Sir John always, instead of her fiancé."

"But," demurred Matilda very practically, "how can she know which is—"

"The Marquis? Very easily: he is wearing his blue ribbon of the Garter. And also, for I heard her say so, a white camelia in his coat."

"A white camelia," repeated Matilda absently.

"This was for her to be able to recognize Monseigneur—but she, she avoids him."

And Hortense threw up her hands to mark her disapproval of behaviour so outrageous.

"She does not know her good fortune," she cried.

A sentiment with which Matilda was in complete accord.

"Still, it's a masked ball," she pointed out, trying to make excuses for the fair delinquent.

But at this Hortense, shrugging her shoulders, merely smiled sardonically as with a final flourish she threw the mask right into Matilda's work-basket.

Matilda could not forbear shuddering.

"Si," admitted Hortense with open scorn, "and therefore there is a licence permitted, *n'est-ce-pas?*"

But again Matilda did not answer: and astutely Hortense appeared to change the subject.

"Strange occasions these," she said. "Impossible to know who one has for a partner, or a guest for that matter, till the moment of unmasking. *Je vous demande*, who is to know with whom he dances? Almost anyone could arrive—a perfect stranger—and amuse themselves very well till after the cotillion. Which is I hear to be danced immediately before supper. And supper is not till one o'clock—a whim of Milady's."

There was such a significance in her words, or Matilda fancied so, that she was quite startled. And under the influence of what she fancied might be Hortense's insinuating suggestion Matilda went cold all over. And yet the more she thought of it the more feasible did the at first

hairbrained scheme become: and the more terrifyingly tempting. Enticing to the last degree—but here Matilda caught herself sternly up. Of course the whole mad notion was nonsense—sheer nonsense.

And yet, what a wonderful adventure it might be, if one dared to take the risks involved. And were they—could they be so utterly insuperable?

A finger on her lip, she sat so motionless—plunged in a tempestuous sea of longing and doubt—that Hortense, fortunately unremarked by her, dared to indulge in a very significant smile as she watched the struggle taking place in Matilda's mind.

"Yes," she said again softly, "a complete stranger might easily slip in for an hour and not a soul be any the wiser."

"Oh, do you think so?" breathed Matilda in the hushed tones of a sleeper, hardly conscious that she had spoken at all.

"*Mais si,*" the Frenchwoman assured her blandly. "A stranger with a pretty frock of—rose colour—shall we say—that has never before been worn."

And with a swift movement she leant forward, picked up the mask from amongst the darning wools of Matilda's work-basket, and fairly flung it into her lap.

"*Mon Dieu,* do not look so startled," she laughed. "What is there in a little mask to make you jump so, *ma chère*? It is but a toy—perhaps an opportunity—who knows?"

And with that she bade Matilda an abrupt good night and withdrew, without one backward glance, leaving a startled and agitated preceptress behind her, indeed.

It is interesting to have to record here that she omitted to close the door; so that the sparkling music of a set of quadrilles invaded the quiet room in increasingly insistent waves of sound.

For twenty silent minutes did the squat clock of alabaster, flanked by its gilt and trumpeting cherubs, tick away unconcernedly: whilst the moon, riding high in the heavens,

shed its beams through the widely open window on a profoundly still and thoughtful Matilda.

But the twenty-first moment showed the bland queen of heaven another picture.

For the schoolroom was dark and empty: and both Matilda and the mask had vanished.

However some quarter of an hour after this Hortense, peeping discreetly from behind a half-closed door on the top landing, noted with unconcealed pleasure a masked figure in a pink tarlatan ball dress—all flounces and illusion up to the trim waist, fan and gloves tightly clutched in a cold paw—steal most unobtrusively down the great staircase to the landing below. And, coming boldly out of her retirement, leant over the balustrade to see this late arrival mingle prudently with the constant stream of people still ascending and descending the stairs. Her eyes watchfully marking the progress of the little hurrying figure Hortense saw her wait for and seize a strategic opportunity to enter the crowded ballroom unnoticed.

"Voilà," said she: and went her way as delicately as any Agag of them all.

Once well inside the crowded and brilliantly lighted room Matilda drew a long breath of relief, and looked round for a comparatively quiet spot wherein she might remain for a little while: and from whence take her peeps at the world and his wife amusing themselves. And her guarded survey of the fascinating spectacle showing her not too far away an empty window embrasure she promptly slipped into it. And in the shadow of the thick, crimson damask curtain stood there, half concealed, examining the animated scene.

Two or three sets of quadrilles were being at the moment danced in the centre of the polished, parquet floor; but a large proportion of the guests, Matilda was happy to note, were either standing about in little groups along the walls, or were seated on the rout-seats which lined them, or were slowly moving to and fro through the chain of state rooms.

With a sigh of thankfulness she came to the conclusion that amongst this mass of decorously revelling men and women she was a very inconspicuous item; and so gave herself up fearlessly to watching the continually changing and shifting panorama before her. Admiring here the shimmer of light on a satin dress, there the sparkle of a jewelled necklace. The constant waving of numberless fans agitated the air about her: and the thousand and one exquisite beauties that go to make up a function where cultivated society amuses itself with all the pomp and circumstance which wealth, allied with taste, can command, displayed themselves before her eyes.

Amidst this almost too dazzling show of pageantry at first Matilda was far too confused to recognize anyone; until, upon the raised and roped off dais at the end of the long and ornately decorated gallery, she espied Her Grace in a dove-grey silk, coronetted and magnificent, nodding emphatically as she talked with H. R. H. the Duchess of Cambridge; who, together with her hostess, was the only person present unmasked.

A further careful scrutiny discovered Lady Victoria in a white tulle dress looped up with pink roses over a satin underskirt—and, as Hortense had informed her, dancing with a tall partner who looked very like Sir John. Involuntarily Matilda shrank farther back into the shadow of her curtain for this couple were dancing in her immediate neighbourhood. But as another look showed her that Lady Victoria had eyes for no one but her attentive cavalier Matilda's first apprehensiveness subsided and she allowed her pleasantly diverted gaze to rove once more composedly all about the great room. And at last so deep was she in her study of the dresses and figures about her that she was quite unaware that she was no longer the sole occupant of her secluded hiding place, until a voice in her ear remarked genially.

"Looking for someone, Miss Matilda Hope?"

And, with a guilty start, she turned to find at her side a

tall mask over whose waistcoat the blue ribbon of the Garter splashed colourfully, and in whose coat there shone a white camelia.

"I wondered if you would be here," he continued, not giving her time to reply to his first audacious utterance. "I've been searching everywhere for you: although you don't deserve it. So badly did you treat me the last time we met. But as I couldn't find Mr. Francis, I began to fear you weren't here after all."

Behind her mask Matilda blushed with deep misgiving and wondered if she ought not to beat an immediate retreat.

"But I am only here for a very little while," she confessed. "I—I—oughtn't to be here at all."

"That of course is unmitigated nonsense," returned the new arrival: "And now I have found you—you are going to dance with me."

"Am I?" asked Matilda, her mood changing in spite of that stern determination to commit no rash act which had been her guiding principle till the moment before. "Do you not take a trifle too much for granted, sir?"

"Not at all," he rejoined with a laugh, "and moreover you will be pleased to choose me as your partner in the cotillion."

But to this suggestion Matilda opposed a decided negative; far different were her plans for the fateful hour of that fantastic dance.

"Oh, no," she replied firmly, "that would be too much. Besides I am sure there is some other young lady who has a greater claim. And I shall be gone too, long before then."

A fresh strain of music set her feet tapping in rhythmical sympathy, a fact the mask was not slow to notice; and with a low bow he offered her his arm.

"Come," he exhorted, smiling coaxingly at her, "we are not going to start by disagreeing tonight—especially when you are wearing my favourite colour—but this waltz you must dance with me; and we can settle later about the

cotillion. You will find I trip it quite passably, I assure you."

Thus urged Matilda ceased to struggle with her wishes any more, and giving herself up to the overwhelming pressure of the moment suffered him to lead her on to the floor and swing her most featly into the terpsichorean current.

To the end of her life the glamour and intoxication of that wonderful dance never quite left her; for it is not too much to say that while it lasted her feet may have touched the earth, but her spirit soared among the stars.

"You dance exceedingly well, Miss Matilda," commented her partner, as he steered her with consummate skill amongst the many revolving couples.

"I'm so glad," she returned, daring to look up at him with shining eyes that did not seek to conceal their happiness, entirely because, very erroneously, she imagined herself completely concealed within the shadow of her lace-edged mask.

"Yes, you are as light as the proverbial feather," he continued, still enveloping her with that new air of masterful proprietorship which at the same time attracted and repelled her: and if her ears did not deceive her he added in an undertone. "You little darling."

It was on account of this odd murmur that Matilda broke hurriedly into conversation.

"I am relieved to hear you commend my steps," she began in her best Swallow's Nest manner—for audacity must be checked with a firm hand. "For at the Misses Nixon I always danced gentleman: and I was afraid I might be inclined to try and guide you—instead of, as one should, leaving it all to you."

"Quite right," said he, "leave it all to me: father will take care of you."

And he laughed openly at Matilda's sudden attack of primness; and went on dancing in a careless silence which yet caressed her, would she or no.

But everything in this world comes to its appointed end: and at length Matilda became aware, with a deep sigh of regret, that the haunting waltz melody was stopping—had topped: and her first dance at her first ball was at an end.

How often had she wondered where and with whom that historic moment was to bloom into life; but never in all her dreams had she visioned this place, or such a partner.

Lord Lassington, however, broke abruptly into her reverie by taking her on his arm and preparing to lead her down the whole length of the still crowded floor, for the finish of the waltz had found them very close to the dais and its exalted occupants.

"Come," said he, "let us get out of this."

Uncertain as to what she ought to do next Matilda drew back hesitatingly.

"Oughtn't I? Shouldn't you?" she began.

"Nothing like it," he declared. "So no more of your if's and but's. I know your funny ways, Miss Matilda. But this time you are coming with me and you are going to eat one of Gunter's strawberry ices. Don't pretend you don't like them."

"Yes," admitted Matilda as they made their way slowly towards the doors, "I must confess to a partiality for strawberry ices; but I'm not so greedy about them as——"

"As who?" he demanded curiously seeing that she stopped dead in the middle of a sentence for no apparent reason, "what were you going to say?"

Matilda bit her lip: in the false security engendered by the complete success of her adventure so far she was beginning to lose her caution, she feared.

"Oh, nothing," she said a little nervously, "only that—I know an Eton boy who ate thirteen ices at a party once."

A stare, followed by a hearty laugh, greeted this observation and Lord Lassington remarked that he believed he knew that boy too—which did not tend to improve Matilda's peace of mind.

"But," he ended, "at least you shall have the best ice can get you in quality, even if you cannot hope to emulate his capacity as to quantity."

And he led her to a seat in the library, which had been turned into a refreshment room for the evening, and leaving her with a last admonition not to run away, returned in a remarkably short space of time bearing in triumph two plates on which, in fluted paper cases flanked by wafers, reposed the pink ices Gunter had made so famous.

"And when we have finished these," he remarked sitting down beside her, "I have quite a serious bone to pick with you."

"Not a marrow-bone I hope," returned Matilda, her mind reverting to that disturbing conversation of a few weeks before; and she laughed that laugh of unalloyed amusement which Lord Lassington always loved to hear.

"Worse by far than a mere marrow-bone," he retorted leaning towards her and smiling at her in that possessive way which Matilda found so agitating; even though she was, as she reminded herself, strictly incognita behind her precious mask.

A moment later, mask or no mask, she was reduced to a state of frozen immobility—for a clear and rather cutting voice much too close at hand addressed her partner in terms of almost sarcastic familiarity.

"Well, Doodles," said the voice of Lady Sarah, "you are indeed neglecting your old friends this evening. But a mask gives great confidence to one."

Lord Lassington rose to his feet moving a step or two away so that he stood between Matilda and his interlocutor much to Matilda's relief.

"Now that's nonsense, Sally," he said, "I've been watching you—and you've been surrounded with the gallant and brave ever since you arrived. However," and he took from her her programme, "I shall do myself the honour of dancing with you at least twice."

Lady Sarah laughed a shade maliciously.

"I'm afraid you can't do that," she said, "all my dances are gone long ago."

"There," he replied with a mock gesture of despair, "I knew it. And in order to prove to you how deeply you have lacerated my feelings, I shall for at least two of your dances lean against the wall in as conspicuous a Byronic attitude as I can manage; and with folded arms I shall observe your every movement."

Lady Sarah reclaimed the bit of painted satin he had wrested from her.

"That will be nice," she returned laughing. "But I can do some watching too," she flung back as she moved away on the arm of her attendant cavalier and was swallowed up in the crowd.

The threat, if threat it were, had no visible effect on its recipient; for with a shrug of his shoulders Lord Lassington returned to Matilda obviously dismissing Lady Sarah and all connected with her immediately from his mind.

At this moment another waltz commenced in the ball-room and Matilda found herself once more on his arm returning to the scene of her first triumph; moreover he very firmly refused to let her go and in a short while she found herself revolving contentedly enough with him to the strains of the Blue Danube.

At the end of this dance Lord Lassington manœuvred Matilda very cleverly into the less frequented Chinese drawing-room, and remarking blandly on the warmth and beauty of the summer night led her through one of its open French windows down the iron steps into the garden.

Silently Matilda moved across the moonlit lawn by his side.

Finally after accomplishing practically the whole circuit of the garden he found a seat to his satisfaction unoccupied under one of the old elms close to the deserted archery butts; and here he waved her to a seat taking one himself beside her on the rustic wooden bench.

Upright Matilda sat, the moonlight gleaming on the

wreath of rose buds which crowned her curls, on the ivory sticks of the fan in her lap, and on the tiny buckles of her pink satin shoes.

And above the continuous dull roar of the London traffic, outside the walls, she fancied she could still hear the beating of her own heart.

Lord Lassington too seemed in no hurry to speak, and after one prolonged and steady look at her turned his gaze thoughtfully on to the grass.

But the glamour of the night and the moment was working its will with them both.

At last he turned abruptly to Matilda.

"Do you like me?" he demanded.

Such bluntness Matilda had not expected; put less tersely she might have conceded a good deal more, very likely. But the suddenness of the question at first irritated her, and then caused her to feel that she must certainly give no hostages to fortune. And so she replied with a caution that even the Misses Nixon must have commended.

"You have been very kind, of course."

Lord Lassington shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"What on earth has that to do with it?" he cried.

"A great deal, I should fancy," replied Matilda.

And she gave him a sidelong glance which said as plain as words that she had no intention of committing herself in any way, not possessing the smallest knowledge of where this singular and leading question of his would land her.

"Pooh! Nonsense! Ridiculous—kind indeed? You don't know what you're talking about."

Under this unanticipated and violent squall of emotional display Matilda remained silent but to Lord Lassington's chagrin extremely composed. So that, after staring at her morosely and perceiving no weakening in the staidness of her demeanour, he broke out precipitately once more in another direction—and one equally discomposing to any inexperienced young lady.

"Have you the slightest idea how pretty you are?" he asked.

Matilda looked away in her turn over the lawn.

Truth compelled her to admit that she had recently made such a discovery whilst modesty kept her tongue tied.

"Do you know it?" he demanded again; quite roughly as it seemed to Matilda.

"To be honest," said she, as he obviously was awaiting some kind of reply, "I hadn't the least idea I was—pretty—till the other day."

Loweringly he regarded her after she had confessed as much.

"Some d—d impertinent fellow with his fulsome compliments—" he began.

"No," returned Matilda firmly. "It was a woman."

"Not a young one, I'll be bound."

"A—a—middle-aged one," faltered Matilda, falling into a silence that seemed to her full of a danger she could not explain to herself.

"The middle-aged party is right," agreed Lord Lassington in accents of deepest gloom; which seemed hardly appropriate to the subject he had started. Unless, of course, Matilda reflected, he held the same views as Miss Janet Nixon—that girls are deceitful and beauty is vain.

"Do you think girls are deceitful?" ventured Matilda, finishing her train of thought aloud.

"Very," said Lord Lassington with curt emphasis.

And then he bent over to her and taking her fan from her lap started to examine it with great care.

"This isn't much of a thing," he declared disparagingly; Matilda bridled, really he was behaving very curiously it seemed to her.

"I regret it does not meet with your approval," she flashed back. "But you never do like my things, do you?"

Lord Lassington turned on her an appraising glance.

"They are never good enough for you," he said. "Now—if I had the dressing of you——"

"Sir!" cried Matilda.

"Now don't get huffy," he begged her. "For you must admit you have no real taste."

"I shall admit nothing of the sort," retorted Matilda warmly and trying to snatch her fan away from him; only to have him dexterously elude her and end by rapping her most brazenly over the knuckles with her own fan.

"Keep your wool on, Miss Matilda," he teased. "I want to ask you something very important."

Absolutely uncertain as to whether she was most amused or annoyed with him Matilda made prim answer.

"I'll do my best to reply to you of course; but you are in a very strange mood this evening it seems to me."

This criticism he ignored completely, and watching the couples strolling up and down about them on the short turf and on the paths beyond seemed to become so immersed in a brown study that Matilda began to suppose that on second thoughts he had changed his mind; and she was about to suggest a move herself when he turned on her again.

"I wish you'd tell me if you do like me," he said.

"Is that so important?" asked Matilda coldly, displeased at such pertinacity.

"Yes."

"Why," demanded Matilda: rather rashly as it turned out.

"Because I am the most miserable devil in London tonight," he retorted: and this reply startled Matilda so that she quite jumped. But if a morose and harsh air proved his assertion he was showing plenty of it she had to admit. Impulsively she turned to him.

"Oh, Lord Lassington," she cried, "but you're going to be married in a few days now."

Hardly crediting his ears he sat there staring at her.

"How did you learn my name?"

Matilda weighed her words with great care before answering him.

"Why—I have known who you were for quite some time now," she returned deliberately, "and that you were—going to be married."

In spite of all her care her voice changed on the last momentous words; but Lord Lassington wrapped in black and Stygian night did not detect her emotion.

"Then I think you might have told me, you sly little thing," he answered.

This unjust criticism Matilda considered eminently like him and did not hesitate to tell him so.

"Besides how could I?" she ended spiritedly. "You know quite well how little we have seen of each other: also it was none of my business."

An obstinate expression crossed Lord Lassington's face.

"I'm not so sure," said he, his gaze fixed on the bright lights of Tilney House.

Matilda's astonishment at this remark of his knew no bounds; and she was just about to explain to him in eloquent terms what she thought of his state of mind when the melody of a fresh dance wafting itself gently over to the bench on which they sat she decided that the moment had come for her to retire from an interview which was now rapidly becoming so unsatisfactory.

"Oh," she murmured and behind her mask her expression was very troubled, "should we not return to the ballroom at once?"

She half rose as she spoke but Lord Lassington put out a detaining hand.

"Not yet," said he, "there's plenty of time."

"But you'll be missed," urged Matilda.

"Let 'em miss me, then," he returned indifferently. "I'm going to clear up this affair: and first of all I want to know who you are."

But to this Matilda's foot beat an impatient tattoo for she was really beginning to lose patience.

"That is of no importance," she rejoined. "As it happens I am just nobody—at all."

"Nonsense!"

"And as you very well know that after next week our paths will never cross again——"

Impetuously he interrupted her.

"I'm not so sure," he repeated.

"I don't think it can possibly be of the faintest use to you to know who I am—actually," finished Matilda most uncompromisingly.

"You might let me be the judge of that—," began Lord Lassington, paused and added with a laugh, "Something tells me our paths are going to cross—quite a lot too."

But Matilda could not agree to this in any way.

"That's absurd," she replied in so glacial a manner that it might have warned the most intrepid of adventurers. But the besotted creature by her side evidently refused to be warned and continued to rush in where even celestial beings might have been pardoned for picking their steps with some degree of care.

"Listen," he began impressively, "if it were not for the fact that we've gone too far now—and to abandon this wedding would cause no end of pother and fuss—I swear I'd stop the whole thing."

Matilda was frankly horrified at this.

"Oh, hush," she begged him in great distress, "please recollect what you are saying—you can't possibly mean it. I can't listen to you—indeed it is not fair to Lady Victoria!"

"So you know my future wife, too," he said, regarding the trembling Matilda steadily. "Why won't you tell me who you are? But there," he finished with a gesture of despair, "you're quite right—what would be the use? Only Heaven alone knows how much farther I can go."

Wildly Matilda looked round for some argument she might advance to change his dark mood, but inspiration nowhere could she find. And still the music flowed on in enchanting waves of sound, and the garden was now more or less deserted by all but themselves. But to Matilda it

looked an arid waste rather than the fairyland of less than half an hour before.

"Yes, it's too much to ask of flesh and blood," said Lord Lassington bitterly.

"Noblesse oblige," ventured Matilda softly, "and we can't always do what we want."

Lord Lassington withdrew his look from the horizon to turn it reprovingly on Matilda.

"The other day you told me to fight for what I wanted."

Hoist with her own petard Matilda uttered an exclamation of dismay.

"Oh, but I had not any idea—and besides it is all nonsense—and please, please forget what I said." And she repossessed herself of her fan.

"Never," he returned briefly, thereby flinging Matilda into a state of the most agitated confusion. "It was very excellent advice and very probably I shall act on it."

And then to Matilda's consternation he caught both her hands fast in his.

"Don't you know I love you—Matilda Hope?" he cried passionately.

Matilda received this announcement with the deepest feelings of shocked distress.

"But that's simply dreadful, I can't listen to you—," he cried.

"I love you," notwithstanding the stubborn creature repeated, "I love you Matilda Hope as I never thought to love any woman. I'm not fond of females really—they alarm me with their endless arrangements and managings—but you stole into my heart; and Heaven knows how I'm going to exist without you, miss."

Matilda sat upright and silent—revolving many things behind the shadow of her mask—the moonlight just touching her: a statue of a young lady in her ball gown.

And much she wished now that she had never given way to temptation and descended from her high estate to this dreadful ball.

Still with her hands in his, Lord Lassington sought for some sign of weakening on Matilda's part.

"Let me see your face," he begged. "Take off your mask."

"No," said Matilda.

"You're afraid," said he.

Matilda resumed possession of her hands and began to fan herself.

"I'm not afraid," she replied coldly; but she edged a little away from her tempestuous neighbour.

With an exclamation of a very unparliamentary nature Lord Lassington snatched the fan from her once more.

"Be careful," admonished Matilda, "you'll break it if you treat it so roughly—and I don't like to hear you use such language."

"I'll give you another fan—dozens," returned the culprit in the most reckless manner transferring her fan to his coat pocket. This idea was so amusing to Matilda that she could not help laughing, demanding from him what she should do with "dozens."

"You could set up a shop," he returned.

"But I don't want to," said Matilda. "And now I'm going in. It must be nearly midnight and I have to——"

"Disappear as usual," said he abstractedly.

And then before she could prevent him he had caught her by the hands again and pulled her towards him.

"Matilda—you little darling—look at me," he urged in a low voice full of repressed passion.

"I'm not going to," she murmured; but there was determination in her tone too, for she felt no good could come of acceding to his disturbing request.

Her refusal only made Lord Lassington more determined.

"I knew you were afraid," he said in such a tone as made her head go up in the air and her chin tip-tilt itself. "And what is more you daren't take off that absurd mask—because you feel safer behind it."

This was a challenge of the most direct kind and beyond all question it made Matilda angry.

"If you dare to think that," she cried, falling into the trap, if trap it was, he had set for her, "I will take it off at once."

And rapidly she untied its ribbons and snatched the mask from her face; then with sparkling eye she sat rebellious and proud, looking straight before her.

And still the voice of the tempter sounded in her ear.

"You see you dare not turn your head and look at me."

"Because," stated Matilda coldly, "I know perfectly well what you look like—and you have a mask on too."

"*Touché*," said he, and removed it. "Now look at me—look at me, Matilda Hope, if you dare."

She could feel his eyes on her, eager and masterful too, could hear a note of yearning in his voice which set her all a-flutter—twice Matilda made an effort to turn to him to demonstrate with him: and failed dismally.

"Oh," she whispered at last, and hid her face in her hands, "why are you so unkind? Let me go—why must you break my heart?"

Gently Lord Lassington gathered her into his arms.

"Don't cry—don't cry—you little darling," he said with real tenderness. "I love you—I love you. Tell me you are for me."

But not waiting for an answer he bent and kissed her.

And with that Matilda woke up; gone was her moment of weakness, of mental and physical paralysis. With blazing eyes she indignantly pushed him away from her with all the force of which she was capable.

"I hate and detest you," she panted. "Fie, for shame, what have I ever done that could lead you to suppose I should permit you to take such liberties? I wish I had never met you: you are behaving with so complete an absence of all decorum, Lord Lassington."

And far away on the Dover Road in their four-post

beds the four Miss Nixons should have turned in their sleep and smiled approvingly.

But wrathfully Matilda faced the sinner: a very Queen of the Icenæ; outraged in every maidenly susceptibility, with so determined and warlike an air that he remained transfixed at his end of the bench—speechless.

"You have no right," she continued icily, "to make love to me. You cannot mean it—and I do not desire your addresses, sir—oh, fie, fie, and you as good as a married man."

Lord Lassington shrugged his shoulders.

"There's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip," he reminded her in so cool a tone that her anger rose again.

"I daresay," she retorted, "but that has nothing to do with me."

And with a swift movement she masked herself once more.

"There," she continued, "the music has stopped, that dance is over. Now I am going into the house."

She rose to her feet as she spoke and he rose with her.

"You'd better put on your mask," she commanded surveying with unbending severity his good-looking, sulky features.

Lord Lassington sighed.

"What a managing little body it is," he said addressing an unresponsive elm beside them. "I am afraid, after all, if she became my wife she'd lead me a dog's life."

Matilda stamped her foot.

"I'm not going to be your wife," she declared crisply.

Lord Lassington nodded confidentially again to the elm tree; whose leaves rustled gently, possibly in sympathy.

"Perhaps just as well—who knows?"

With a brisk step Matilda started to walk across the grass.

"Lady Victoria is to have that doubtful happiness," she remarked.

"Sarcastic, too," he rejoined as he fell into step beside her. "As well as professorial in your views. Had you by any

ance a scholastic worthy amongst your forebears? Your such, if I may venture to draw your attention to it, verges on the cheaply satiric, at times."

But this attempt at raillery did not impress Matilda.

"It's a sad pity," she returned with an air of disdain, "that you have always so evidently had your own way. It is completely spoilt your character, I am afraid."

Deftly steering his way through the outskirts of the crowd, once more pouring out of the house to take the air between the dances, Lord Lassington further incensed Matilda by tucking her arm in his before she could prevent him.

"I'm not going to have my way this time," he reminded her. "And as you will never forgive me I'm going to have no more waltz with you now even if I swing for it later——"

"A highwayman, that's what you should have been, a highwayman," said Matilda with conviction.

By this time they had reached the terrace steps and ascending them they passed again into the brilliantly lighted drawing-room. Still in the far distance the Duchess sat on the dais conversing with her exalted guests: and still Lady Victoria was flirting with her devoted swain Sir John Carlow.

Matilda took a sudden resolution.

"I will dance once more with you," she said as the music struck up.

And for the third time Lord Lassington whirled her into the maze of dancers.

Watchfully she made the round of the ballroom twice: and then seizing her opportunity made him halt by one of the great doors that led into the hall, professing that she had slightly twisted her ankle, as somewhere in the distance the clock boomed out twelve sonorous strokes. Instantly Lord Lassington was all reproachful care and attention.

"Please, just fetch me a glass of water," begged Matilda as she sank on to a chair just inside the door. "It is nothing

I assure you—I shall be quite recovered if I may rest here for a few minutes.”

Full of concern he hurried away on his errand.

But as soon as his back was turned Matilda stood up, glanced warily round and lost herself in the crowd. Slipping out of the room she flitted across the hall and through the swing door into the back regions of Tilney House.

Long and fruitlessly did Lord Lassington search for his charmer who, with her door locked was swiftly divesting herself of her finery in her room on the third floor, and at the same time with burning cheeks was promising herself that she would never forgive that one audacious male who even then was frantically looking in the most unlikely places for her.

But she had vanished—given him the slip as usual—and from that moment the ball and everything about it lost all interest for Lord Lassington.

CHAPTER XVI

RELATES HOW LADY SARAH MADE COMPLETE HAY OF ALL
THE DUCHESS'S PLANS; AND HOW, EGGED ON BY
HER, LADY VICTORIA PREVAILED ON MATILDA TO
CARRY OUT CERTAIN ALTERATIONS IN THEM

FROM what simple beginnings may the most revolutionary undertakings spring.

If Lady Victoria English had not decided to defy her parent at nine-thirty o'clock of a summer's morning and to refuse to carry out that morning's carefully thought-out programme (as was most manifestly her duty) and if the lady Sarah Hemerton, having nothing important on hand that A.M. had not conceived the idea of spending an idle hour with her friend, then the whole of Matilda's subsequent career might have been a scholastic one—who knows? But Fate giving her ball a twist and a toss sent it spinning towards Matilda—with very remarkable results.

So it was that Lady Victoria, a prey to the most agitated indecision, left the breakfast table to retire to her bedroom, there to commune darkly with herself, unaware that in so doing she was playing Fate's own game for her.

Thus are we all mere pawns in the hands of Destiny, who orders the board with deft fingers while we reckon nothing of the importance of actions which, in our blindness, seem to us merely trivial.

To the onlooker, Lady Victoria now being, as Mr. Bartie happily phrased it "within a stone's throw of her wedding," merely seemed as though she was minded for once to take a few hours off from the treadmill of preparation, as were, for that event.

Therefore when, as I have already stated, she refused to be bothered by the keeping of any engagements made for her by her mother for that morning, nobody imagined that she was a pawn in the hand of Destiny; but that she was only, as was her way, showing herself to be wayward and capricious at the most inconvenient season.

Perfectly undisturbed at it, she left behind her open disapproval and secret astonished dismay equally indifferently.

The door of her own room closed upon her, she threw herself into a chair close by an open window with a sigh that was almost a sob, and became instantly lost in thought.

All about her heaped up with lavish unconcern on chairs and tables, and overflowing from numberless opened boxes lay, on all hands, the lovely evidences of the final preparations for that event which at St. George's, Hanover Square, was shortly to transform her into the new Marchioness of Lassington. And make her thereby the mistress of one of the most beautiful houses in Town, and no less than two splendid seats in the country. At the same time as it, to her mother's no small amusement, moved her into the position of one of the most important hostesses of a London in which entertainment was still a fine art. But with all these advantages staring her in the face Lady Victoria English was by no means as content as she should have been: since she was on an emotional see-saw which threatened either to toss her into a permanent if romantic heart-ache, or dump her into a more mundane, if thorough, state of discontented headache—by reason of her inability to make up her mind; or, having made it, to stick to it. Like many a sentimentalist before her, she wanted the fleshpots of Egypt and love-in-a-cottage at one and the same moment. And she was still feebly debating, unknown of course to those most concerned, questions that Lady Sarah, being governed by her head rather than her heart, would in the same circumstances have dismissed long before as

mply foolish and so much waste of time. And debating
em to no real or decided issue.

So deep however were her meditatings that she did not
hear her mother enter the room some quarter of an hour
later. And it was not till the Duchess, in her most top-
fical style, started to harangue her harassed and haras-
ing offspring that Lady Victoria came to, and sitting up in
her chair did her parent the courtesy of paying her an
extremely perfunctory attention: with, be it noted, an
open frown on her brow and rank mutiny in her heart.

The Duchess uttered a preliminary majestic period
so.

"I never even heard you come in, Mama," said Lady
Victoria petulantly, as soon as she could get a word in.

The Duchess glowered at her annoying child.

"But you can always hear what doesn't concern you,
Victoria," she riposted; returning to her next immediately
-which was that, as ever, the erratic behaviour of the
ride-to-be was distressing in the extreme to all those who
d her welfare at heart.

Lady Victoria now pensively dipping, at regular intervals,
to a large box of chocolates at her elbow (to aid her
presumably in the workings of what she was pleased to
call her mind) contested vigorously her mother's statements.
Boldly she announced that, for once, she was not going to
be driven like a sheep to the slaughter.

The Duchess at once challenged the avowal.

"Sheep—yes, that's just what you are, Victoria, a sheep.
and possess about as much intelligence, my dear."

As to that Lady Victoria was careless enough.

"But even a sheep has feelings," she pointed out with a
out.

"Feelings! Bah!" the Duchess's scorn was devastating
deed. "Giving way to every unhealthy emotion. When
people begin to talk about their feelings it invariably
means they propose to let someone down—and heavily."

The shot landed too close to the bull's-eye for Lady

Victoria who moved uneasily and coloured up; becoming suddenly conscious that on her lap, concealed as she hoped successfully by a flounce of her flowered muslin frock there lay an opened letter. The contents of which had not only set her executing the most dizzy of movements on her mental see-saw; but which she had found in perusal to be so stimulating in their tenour as to be more than merely startling. Indeed it might be admitted, first as last, that ever since her first reading of this epistle with her early morning cup of tea she had found herself in a state of the most frantic and undecided nature. And now having read the disturbing piece of literature no less than five frenzied times she was still no nearer making up her mind as to what action, if any, she should take regarding it. To be accurate it was very much on account of this unexpected communication that she had retired so suddenly from the matutinal feast of bacon and poached eggs, toast and marmalade.

And now just when, as she felt, she needed all her wits about her here was her autocratic maternal relative distracting her attention dreadfully: and entirely preventing her from completing that piece of calm, deliberate self-analysis she had been engaged upon in the interests as she realized of—everybody. An analysis which yet might be fraught with such stupendous results.

If only her mother would go away and let her get on with it instead of standing there in the centre of the floor; most decidedly on the war-path and bent on raising scalps.

"Too, too irritating," reflected Lady Victoria in much perturbation of soul.

For the Duchess was, with each passing moment, making it increasingly clear that she distrusted Lady Victoria's excuses as definitely as her mood; and was bent on perceiving a sinister meaning in her desire to be for once alone.

And further, that if Lady Victoria's "wits were going a 'wool-gathering'," as she contemptuously expressed it, at so late an hour it was for no good purpose.

"But what do you think I can do, Mama, for goodness' sake?" demanded the irritated girl.

But no air of injured innocence, however plausible, could, it seemed, serve her here.

"You won't get a chance of doing anything," retorted her mother grimly. "Let that be quite clear."

"Ultimatum number one hundred and sixty-five," murmured the irrepressible Lady Victoria.

"But," continued her mother, "let us have an understanding, Victoria, if you please."

Shrugging her shoulders the young rebel remained silent; for the simple reason that now she, too, suspected her mother's aims. Not at all sure of what Her Grace's objective might be, a spirit of prudence decided her to let the attack develop. For she had no intention of being thrust blindfold into some absolutely iron trap from which there might be no means of escape. Thus determined to give no hostages to fortune if she could help it she helped herself to another chocolate, assuming at the same time a stonily picturesque attitude of drooping maidenhood: and for once decidedly not quailing before the Duchess's imperial and lashing glance.

"An understanding—for I do not intend to leave the room till we do come to one," persisted her mother, "do you hear, miss?"

Lady Victoria signified that she did; whilst privately resenting this determination of her parent's as a very great nuisance, and very much of a bore, too. Yet considering the matter she saw no way out of it but compliance with Her Grace's wish, at any rate for the time being. So dipping once again into her fast emptying box of chocolates, she raised a wary eye in the direction of the Duchess and replied politely:

"Certainly, Mama, what do you want me to say?"

The Duchess took an impatient step towards her.

"There is no necessity for a conversational effort of any kind on your part, Victoria," she replied austere. "I

merely desire to warn you that this is no time to indulge in caprice of any kind; it may be too dangerous for you. Moreover I should be glad to ascertain from your own lips if you are aware that Doodles came to me yesterday and suggested—yes, actually suggested,” the Duchess’s voice became vibrant with horrified emotion, “that this wedding of yours on Thursday next should be indefinitely postponed.”

She paused for a reply, but receiving none added coldly, “A simple yes or no from you will be ample.”

Lady Victoria held by her mother’s stern look fidgetted uneasily in her seat.

“Well, then, yes, Mama,” she muttered unwillingly, after a moment; thereby increasing her parent’s anxiety a thousandfold.

“Did you put him up to it?” was the next enquiry.

But to this demand Lady Victoria could oppose a vigorous and truthful denial.

“No, Mama, I should never have suggested such a course to him.”

The Duchess professing herself delighted to learn as much followed up the commendation by desiring to know who was the culprit.

“For it’s an insult to us all,” she said.

Lady Victoria’s air of lackadaisical indifference now deserted her for the moment, so relieved was she to find that she was no longer in the forefront of the battle, more, that the attack was centering on another salient. She therefore ventured to add some comments of her own on the point under discussion.

“That’s what I’d like to know—who put it in his head,” she returned, “you could have knocked me down with the smallest feather in creation——”

“Don’t exaggerate, Victoria.”

“But you could, Mama, when Doodles came to me and said he didn’t think us suited, and he was going to see what

you thought about it. Of course I knew what you would say."

"I should think so," said the Duchess stonily.

"It so took my breath away that I let him go: not that I had the least intention of being jilted by Doodles," finished Lady Victoria with exemplary firmness.

The Duchess expressed herself glad to hear this; adding that possibly she had underrated her daughter's good sense. Which however she must admit seemed to be so often, like pug's beauty, conspicuous by its absence.

To this left-handed compliment Lady Victoria merely replied that she was often not such a fool as she looked: and in her turn pointed out that on this occasion Doodles was the blameworthy object; and that he had been very queer and moody ever since the night of their ball. This was evidently news to the Duchess.

"Really," she asked. "I have noticed nothing. But perhaps he was annoyed with you for dancing half the evening with——"

Hastily Lady Victoria interrupted, conscious as she was both of the incriminating document concealed in her lap and her sad lack of decorum on the occasion in question.

"But that's perfect nonsense," she cried. "I'm not married to Doodles yet; and he's not the Shah of Persia. Besides he really neglected me shamefully."

"Nonsense, Victoria."

"Yes, Mama," she persisted. "Sally told me she saw him dancing with all sorts of people."

"And whose was the fault?" pertinently asked Her Grace.

"Some creature in a pink frock and a wreath of rosebuds, more than once Sally said."

"And where were you, Victoria?"

This was an unpleasantly direct and disconcerting question.

"As a matter of fact," concluded her ladyship hurriedly, "he knew all about my dancing with John. Our steps suit so well——"

"Stuff!" thus the Duchess.

"And he did not mind—he told me so."

And having fairly boxed the compass in her explanation Lady Victoria sank back in her chair, and put out a listless hand for another sweet.

"Changeable as a weathercock, that's what you are, Victoria," sighed the Duchess. "And I shan't know a peaceful moment till you are married."

"Well, that won't be long now—the day after tomorrow," giggled Lady Victoria in mocking consolation. "Not much more time for a bust up, if that's what you're afraid of, Mama."

"Victoria!" cried Her Grace wincing at such plain speaking. "I must beg—vulgarity personified."

And, wished grimly that she could keep her daughter safely locked up and out of harm's way for the next forty-eight hours. For there was a light in the deceitful little minx's eye she did not care to see. And although the Duchess was certainly shaken in her previous opinion that the bride herself had been responsible for the unpleasing idea developed by her future son-in-law yet she still felt mischief was a-foot. Though certainly where the actual point of danger might lie she was at an utter loss to conjecture. Yet, a silent and brooding Victoria—as she had been for more than a week past—had from her babyhood always proved an arch conspirator of the deepest dye—a very Guy Fawkes. And, alas, many a time and oft a too maddeningly successful one. Therefore an explosion she felt, rather than knew, must be close at hand; as, from bitter experience Her Grace was recognizing all the old symptoms—especially that most sinister one of her first born's flow of conversation almost entirely ceasing. Ruefully she reflected, also, that a bride who did not know her own mind from day to day she might and could cope with—indeed had been doing so actively for the past three months—but when it came to a bridegroom who formulated doubts of so menacing a character at the eleventh hour; here was

that which threatened dire disaster to all her hopes, indeed.

And the Duchess was still very human, holding certain ambitions for her daughter's future which she considered eminently right and proper.

But from the bottom of her heart she feared—even knew that no mere woman could ever quite fathom the processes of the male mind; or could hope to divine to just what depths of the quixotic or imbecile a man might descend should fancy seize him. For one wild moment—completely mazing to herself—the Duchess almost wished her late husband alive again. But the instant of weakness passed; and Her Grace, drawing one deep breath, was her inimitable self once more.

Then with a profoundly speculative optic cocked on her daughter she resumed the burden of her discourse.

"Now, mind," she warned, "no tricks, Victoria."

"Mama!"

Lady Victoria's air was one of genuine horror it seemed. So far, then, so good.

"Between this and then."

"Oh, Mama!"

But here, in its pained intensity, Lady Victoria's dismay was too shrill—or so the Duchess considered.

Innocence needs no such high-voiced protestations.

"I have had," continued the Duchess in measured tones, the devil's own delight in getting Doodles' mind settled again—one hour by the clock it took me, an hour I could spare—and in making him see reason."

"As if he could break it off at the last moment—with the cake all made and everything," returned Lady Victoria seriously as she deposited her final chocolate with a sigh in her mouth.

But this inept and childish remark only had the effect of further incensing her mother.

"Fudge!" she cried, "you would mention the least important circumstance, Victoria. You only think of food, I

do believe, like your father before you from morning till night."

"I love oyster patties," admitted Lady Victoria pensively.

"But you'll get fat, my dear, extremely stout long before you're forty let me tell you—if you only live for your food at this early age."

With marked hauteur Lady Victoria drew herself up.

"That will do, Mama," she observed firmly. "Don't croak. As if I didn't know that when I look at you—I see myself, you know."

The Duchess gasped; such insolence she had not looked for.

"Victoria!" she cried, "you forget yourself."

But her impertinent daughter only laughed, feeling she had scored indeed.

An uncomfortable silence supervened; employed by Lady Victoria in nonchalantly turning upside down her empty chocolate box in a vain search for some possibly overlooked crumb of comfort.

"Pray attend to me," began the Duchess again.

"I am attending, Mama."

"And try to behave," crisply admonished Her Grace, "as a young lady of your position should."

"Oh, bother," said Lady Victoria.

"I have as I said before," resumed the Duchess warming to her theme, "had an extremely trying time with your future husband. And if I didn't know from my own observation that he hadn't so much as looked at another——"

"Cat," suggested Lady Victoria.

"Female," corrected the Duchess.

"What about that insipid pink creature of Sally's?"

The Duchess waved aside the absurd interruption.

"I'd say he was madly in love—and not with you, miss."

Conscious of a spasm of unexpected jealousy Lady Victoria still tossed her head scornfully at her mother's words. For she was very shrewdly aware that Doodles as her husband would never be more than a side issue where she

was concerned; and that what feeling she had ran in quite other channels. Still she had to admit that the conjecture just voiced by the Duchess was not at all a welcome one and she was therefore about to suggest that perhaps some research work had better be undertaken in respect of this novel idea when the Duchess continued on quite another tack.

"As it is he must be jibbing at losing his liberty, one can only suppose."

And this idea was not entirely pleasing to Lady Victoria either.

"That's idiotic, then," she observed impatiently. "For the matter of that I'm losing mine too."

At this instant there sounded a light tap on the door which prevented the Duchess from dealing with this point as she could have wished. So excellent an opening for a much needed homily on the duties of a good and obedient wife she had never been endowed with before. But Lady Victoria had already bounded to her feet and had bidden the newcomer to enter; heartily glad of the, to her, most welcome interruption.

And delicately, as the Biblical hero of old, there stepped in upon them Lady Sarah Hemerton: a vision of elegance in a complete walking suit of pale blue muslin and taffeta, with a large hat of Leghorn straw, round which a crown of yellow daisies wound, perched on her fair head.

"Oh, Sally, how glad I am to see you," cried the Lady Victoria: and for once at least she spoke the truth and nothing but the truth.

Lady Sarah was full of tact in her greetings.

"Well," said the Duchess after the customary compliments had passed on both sides, preparing to vacate the field, "I'll leave you two girls to amuse yourselves till lunch time. But mind, Sally you who have some worldly sense are to discourage Victoria from taking any silly step at this late hour. She is not to contemplate destroying her future between this and one o'clock as a pleasant pastime. For

I have been—," she ended moving slowly towards the door as she spoke, "all along perfectly aware that she has a letter at this moment in her lap from that tiresome swain of hers, John Marlow." Opening the door she paused on the threshold to add,

"If I had had my way he'd have gone to the Crimea weeks ago."

And not even bothering to remark the effect of this thunderbolt she took herself off shutting the door firmly behind her.

Lady Victoria gazed at the closed door with blank dismay in her face.

"Now, how does Mama find out all these things?" she demanded plaintively. "Upon my word she ought to have been a Bow Street runner—she's lost as a Duchess."

Lady Sarah received this sally with an appreciative ripple of laughter; and, after embracing her friend, bade her cheer up as it was always darkest before dawn. After which Socratean observation she removed her little silk jacket, threw her hat on the bed, and seating herself on the arm of Lady Victoria's chair professed herself ready for a good gossip.

Lady Victoria regarded her frowningly.

"What do you mean—darkest before dawn, Sally?" she demanded.

"Nothing particular," rejoined her friend carelessly as she made a dive for the empty chocolate box. "You pig, Torie," she continued in a tone of utter disgust, "I declare you've eaten at least two pounds of chocolate this morning."

The accusation did not trouble Lady Victoria who openly acknowledged possessing the sweetest of teeth.

"Well, there's some Turkish Delight somewhere about—you can eat that," she returned.

Briskly Lady Sarah removed herself from her perch and began a systematic search for the glutinous but delectable compound, averring that she was not at all sure that she did not prefer that sweetmeat to any other.

"I have often wondered how the Turks managed a harem," she observed pensively.

"Sally!" cried Lady Victoria.

"But it's all quite easy I can see most plainly now."

"Why?" asked Lady Victoria, recovering from her first sense of shock at the introduction of so dubious a topic.

"Because," returned Lady Sarah, "if the Turkish ladies are always munching 'Delight'—they can't do much talking. So they must be good listeners. And men do so love to air their views to an intelligently silent audience."

This was a new view of the Turkish marriage question for Lady Victoria.

"I never thought of that," she admitted, and then added in a tone of flat despondency, "but who cares—they're only Turks."

This ominous change of mood was not noticed by Lady Sarah, still actively hunting for the elusive sweetmeat, and she did not pay any attention to her friend till that much envied young débutante sprang to her feet with alarming precipitancy—overturning her chair with a loud crash—and casting herself, crinoline and all, upon her bed, burst into floods of tears declaring that nobody in the whole world seemed to care whether she lived or died.

To say that Lady Sarah was thunderstruck at such an accusation is understating the truth.

"Why, whatever is the matter, Torie?" she cried in great distress and ran across the room to the disconsolate Lady Victoria.

"I wish I was dead—I hate Mama—I detest Doodles—and I dislike everything in the world, I think," she wailed, the tears streaming down her face.

Lady Sarah regarded her friend with deep disquiet; such plain signs of revolt she had never encountered before.

"But that's a horrid state of mind to be in," she chided.

The Niobe nodded feebly.

"I know," she gasped between her sobs, "nobody better—

because I'm in it. And it's like being in a fog—there doesn't seem any way out."

Lady Sarah regarded her friend with a speculative eye.

"It's a pity you feel like that—" she was beginning: but Lady Victoria, making a strong effort to control her tears, sat up on the edge of her bed, catching her by the arm.

"Lock the door, Sally," she commanded, and dried her eyes in a businesslike manner.

"Good Heavens! Why?" asked the puzzled Lady Sarah: going over nevertheless to the door and turning the key in the lock. "You're very mysterious."

Lady Victoria shook her head.

"I'm not—I'm only cautious," she explained.

Then she held out at arm's length the letter of which her mother had made such sarcastic mention.

"Listen," she continued hurriedly, "in this letter John says he doesn't care if he's killed, or not, in Russia."

A rising sob half choked her next words.

"And if he dies—it will be all my fault—he says so."

"That's mean," commented Lady Sarah, who began to think she was expected to perform the office of chief mourner at the final interment of Lady Victoria's affair of the heart.

"All my fault because I've taken—taken—the—the——"

She hesitated and finally stopped dead; leaving Sarah full of curiosity.

"Taken what?" she repeated.

"Taken the—I'm sure I forget what it is now," and Lady Victoria hastily referred to the epistle of doom. "The saviour out of his life."

Both girls looked at each other uncertainly: Lady Sarah was inclined to be very indignant at so far-fetched an accusation.

"What does he mean?" wailed Lady Victoria; who never having dealt at all in parable completely missed the allusion.

"It's something to do with the Bible, and salt," explained Lady Sarah.

Across Lady Victoria's face flitted a look of blank astonishment.

"Salt?" she repeated in a dramatic whisper. "But what is that got to do with a special licence—and my meeting him at the King's Weigh House Chapel?"

What, indeed?

Although to Lady Sarah the communication was extremely enlightening.

For fully five minutes she kept her eyes on her friend making no effort to reply to the question propounded to her.

Then she fell back a pace.

"But you're not really thinking of jilting Doodles—now?" she cried.

With a petulant shrug of her shoulders the future Marchioness of Lassington slipped off the bed: and, for once heedless of appearances, replied a thought incautiously: "He thought of it first."

There was a horrified expostulation from the Lady Sarah.

"But you know as well as I do it's impossible, Sally. Mama would never let me change my mind. You heard what she said just now."

Her air of sweet reasonableness did not so easily take to her friend; who was beginning to see that Lady Victoria was more than ready to give the slip to her responsibilities. Who, in short, was in such a state of mind that any match of construction could set alight the gunpowder of her emotional longings.

"You'd do it I believe, if you had half a chance," said Lady Sarah nodding wisely. "A more guilty face I never saw," she ended, on a judicial note, and caught her friend by both hands.

Lady Victoria snatched her hands away.

"Oh, don't fuss so, Sally. I know as well as you do it couldn't be done when Mama watches me all day and half

the night—like the old lynx she is. Why I haven't even seen John since the ball."

Lady Sarah burst out laughing, she could not help it: for the situation was certainly *piquante* to an onlooker.

"And a good thing, too," she said, "but how did you come by this letter?"

Aggrieved at so manifest a want of sympathy Lady Victoria found herself disinclined to confess, but a moment's thought showing her that by now the channel must be a matter of public knowledge, or else how had her mother come by her information, she decided to be frank.

"The old crossing-sweeper at the entrance to the Park down the road," she said sulkily enough. "Ages ago John arranged with him to be our postman."

"Cupid's Carrier," teased Lady Sally: and for once Lady Victoria had the grace to blush and feel a little ashamed of herself.

Lady Sarah endowed her wayward companion with another slow and appraising look.

"Do you mean to go through with this wedding on Thursday, Victoria?"

There was a pause.

"No—," returned Lady Victoria cornered at last. "At least not if I can help it," she added weakly.

Lady Sarah sat down with a complete air of collapse.

"The lies you've been telling," she said. "Come, Torie, speak the truth for once—I won't give you away."

Thus reassured Lady Victoria assumed a more composed air and prepared to develop her point of view.

"The fact is, Sally," she began, "I have been just torn to bits. Sometimes I feel I'd better marry Doodles and then I realize I'm very much attached to John. Have you ever noticed how wonderful he looks in uniform? Somehow I don't think I could bear it if some other girl got him."

In spite of the almost childish triviality of her reasoning there was a *cri-de-cœur* underlying the whole speech which set its hearer to thinking fast and furiously. Such real

eling, she felt, could not be entirely ignored. But it was
ely to be very hard on Doodles, who never had taken
s fiancée's penchant for Sir John Marlow very seriously.
dded to which she, like Lady Victoria herself, could see
o way out of the impasse without a terrific scandal, for the
luchess held every trump in the pack.

Or—did she?

With a stupendous and Machiavelian notion springing
birth in her mind Lady Sarah remained contemplating
r troubled friend and the situation together.

At last she spoke.

"Sometimes I think you are too silly for words," she
gan, "that's all bosh about his uniform, you know. But
you honestly mind, Torie, honestly don't want to walk
o the aisle on Thursday—I know a girl who does."

"What!"

"Who would be delighted to step into your shoes,"
nished Lady Sarah calmly.

"No!" cried Lady Victoria, and added fervently. "I only
ish she could."

A second after she cried breathlessly, "Not you, Sally?"

The question drew from Lady Sarah a short laugh.

"Good Lord, no," she returned with a most uncompromis-
g candour. "Doodles isn't my style at all—we always
ght."

With all her curiosity now actively working Lady Victoria
n across to where her mentor lolled in her chair and
nging herself down on the windowseat she begged Lady
arah to be so good as to inform her who the new candidate
r matrimonial honours might be.

"I'll tell you all about her—if you'll let me read your
tter," Lady Sarah said, holding out her hand for the
ocument.

"I couldn't do that," returned Lady Victoria instantly all
a-flutter, and she hid the epistle behind her with a quick
ovement, "it's a love letter, Sally."

Lady Sarah was extremely scornful.

"As if I didn't know that—and he wants you to elope—hand it over, Torie."

There was so much good-humoured determination in her tone that Lady Victoria, always inclined to yield to the other girl's stronger nature, gave in and meekly handed over the precious missive.

"Hum—," said Lady Sarah perusing it rapidly. "So it's all settled—as I thought—even to where you are going to spend your honeymoon. What a deceitful thing you are, Torie; you could just as well have confided in me at first, without going through that ridiculous scene just now."

Hard pressed and in a real fix now that her secret was out Lady Victoria sighed heavily, admitting the deadlock.

"But can you help me?" was her anxious question.

Lady Sarah nodding, handed back the letter.

"I believe I can," she said slowly. "I've got an idea."

A gleam of hope lighted up Lady Victoria's dark sky.

"But you must put yourself completely in my hands, Torie."

"All right."

And with a mounting excitement Lady Victoria faced her fellow conspirator.

"Who is the other girl?" she demanded.

A tolerant smile flickered into life over Lady Sarah's severe expression of authoritative despotism.

"All in good time," she rejoined. "But first let it be quite clear—if I am to help you—do you, or do you not, want to marry Doodles?"

"You know I don't—not if I can help it."

"He'll make a very good-natured, easy-going husband."

"I dare say——"

"And you'll have plenty of money—oh, everything an ambitious girl could want."

"I know."

"Humph," commented Lady Sarah drily, "there seems no help for it then. This other girl——"

"Yes, who is she?"

But for the moment Lady Sarah brushed aside the question as unimportant: for she was thinking the scheme tight. And the more she contemplated it the more feasible and even fascinating did it appear.

"If we get her to take your place on Thursday——"

Lady Victoria could hardly believe her ears.

"Take my place," she repeated incredulously, "why it couldn't be done; it's absurd, Sally.

"It might be done—with luck," was the astounding reply of the Lady Sarah: and beckoning the bride-elect closer she began in a low and guarded voice to sketch out her amazing plan on the well-known principle that success consists in three parts of audacity to one of determination.

"Listen," said she, "if you disappear before Thursday as sure as eggs hatch into little chickens you'll be caught and brought back."

Lady Victoria admitted the probability sadly.

"But if you changed dresses—with the girl I'm thinking—at the last moment; and she wore that thick Brussels lace veil you hate so——"

"Yes—yes—," already Lady Victoria's mind of straw was catching fire.

"And she was sensible enough to hold her tongue in the marriage driving to Saint George's—after all she's only got to cope with that blind old cousin of yours, George Asshington—," continued Lady Sarah thoughtfully.

"And he'll be much too occupied with his own clothes to bother."

"And she's just your height——"

Immersed in its possibilities and in the perfect construction of her rapidly growing scheme Lady Sarah now rose from her chair and began to pace up and down the room, her hands behind her, her brow knitted and her lips pursed. Never had she before had such a chance of ruling the tiny of her friends.

She was recalled to the present by a peal of genuinely lighted laughter from Lady Victoria. "What fun," cried

this mercurial damsel, her imagination also at work; "let's do it, Sally."

Lady Sarah halted for a moment in her paces to and fro.

"Yes, the chances are she'd get to the church," she said consideringly. "And she might even get through the service—and I happen to know Doodles is mad about her."

"In love?"

Lady Sarah nodded.

"Simply idiotically."

This intimation satisfactory as it should have been from an unselfish point of view certainly did not please Lady Victoria.

"Well—there's a deceitful wretch," she pouted.

Promptly Lady Sarah turned on her and sardonically pointed out that as she didn't want him for herself she might just as well let him go with a good grace.

"Besides, really we are going to do him a service," she concluded. "At all events he'll have a wife."

This was a stimulating thought to the bride-elect.

"And nothing need be wasted," she added in a satisfied voice.

Then a disquieting notion entered her head.

"But shall I have to give up all my lovely trousseau?"

The idea was so evidently unwelcome and Lady Victoria began to look so uncertain again that Lady Sarah hastened to reassure her very volatile little friend.

"Certainly not," she made haste to announce. "Don't be silly, Torie."

After which she resumed her pantherlike paces up and down the room; and Lady Victoria ventured to hazard a suggestion, in her turn.

"And I could slip out and get married to John."

"Whilst we were all at Saint George's," finished Lady Sarah.

A broad smile irradiated the face of Lady Victoria.

"Why it's as easy as——"

"Lying." Lady Sarah ended the sentence with a sarcasm worthy of a female Mephistopheles. "But it will need cool heads, I warn you. Of course I think you a fool, Torie; but, after all, why make four people wretched?"

Very easily indeed could Lady Victoria feel the force of this argument; and she admitted as much gracefully enough. But another point was troubling her now far more; and one that was of the most vital importance, if the delightful intrigue was to turn out successful, undoubtedly. For wholeheartedly now she was giving herself up to the fascinating new turn of events—events which promised to make her not only happy, but the heroine, as she considered, of a romance as good as any she had ever read in the most dramatic novel.

"Sally—you must tell me who she is."

And she joined her rescuer, as she was already beginning to name Lady Sarah, in her marching and counter marching up and down the sunny room. With a quick movement the other girl turned, slipping her arm in that of her friend.

"She's very luckily in this house," she replied with a chuckle. "I'm going to ring the bell, Torie; and you must ask Hortense, when she comes, to send Miss Horsey to you at once."

The promenaders came to a dead halt in the middle of the carpet; and Lady Victoria disengaged herself slowly.

"Mad!" said she regretfully. "Quite, quite mad, poor soul."

But Lady Sarah was already ringing for Hortense.

"Nonsense," she returned not a whit disturbed by this reception of her command and with a briskness that was curiously convincing, "you do what I tell you. And go and unlock the door, my dear."

Thus ordered, with an air of complete stupefaction, and repeating— "Horsey, little Horsey," in a tone of the utmost bewilderment, Lady Victoria carried out her task and turned once again to the side of her autocratic general.

"I suppose you've never noticed she's rather like you at a distance."

But Lady Victoria was not listening.

"And you mean to tell me—she's in love with Doodles?"

A vigorous nod was all Lady Sarah wasted on the doubting Thomasine.

"But," objected Lady Victoria, looking wildly about her, "but she's never met him, Sally."

"Hasn't she?" Lady Sarah's tone was illuminating. "That's where you are absolutely, and I may add, entirely mistaken, my dear. But wait till she comes."

On Hortense making her appearance Lady Victoria, still as one in the wildest of dreams, issued the order that Matilda should, as soon as might be, present herself.

"And tell her to hurry," added Lady Sarah. "It's most important."

Respectfully surprised at this incursion of a mere visitor into what seemed to be no affair of hers Hortense raised her eyebrows slightly, inclined her head less, and departed on her errand. And both conspirators sat down to await the coming of their victim.

But for all her coaxings no further word of explanation could Lady Victoria get from her resolute friend. All that Lady Sarah would say in response to her most impassioned pleading was:

"You leave it to me, Torie. The less you know now the better. For it's going to be a difficult hand to play, and I want all my wits about me."

Leagues and worlds away was Matilda, hurrying down in answer to her summons, from guessing what that next fateful hour was to unfold.

True, from almost the first moment of her entrance into the room, she was half aware of a curious suppressed excitement about both girls which aroused a faint wonder in her mind; again as she moved towards them it seemed to be the signal for a definitely concerted action on their part; which although not arousing any very marked suspicions

to their friendliness yet surprised her. Their proceedings seemed to be so odd.

"Sit down, little Horsey," said Lady Victoria indicating a chair in her immediate vicinity and so placed that Matilda taking it must needs face the light, "sit down—we want to talk to you."

At that same instant Lady Sarah went swiftly by her to the door; first opened it, then peered out on to the empty landing, after which she shook her head decidedly and locking the door put the key in her pocket.

By this time somewhat bewildered at actions that were so mysterious and even sinister to her, and utterly unable to account for them in any way, Matilda looked uncertainly from one girl to the other and remained motionless: until Lady Victoria rising from her seat pushed her into the one she had first indicated, and remained standing over her much as an austere policeman might mount guard over an already discovered and very unsuccessful criminal. At least Matilda could not forbear thinking of the situation in some such terms.

Joined now by the more truculent Lady Sarah both damsels confronted the fast petrifying Miss Horsey.

"Now," began Lady Sarah after a long pause, with a quavity that masked dangerous designs, "Before we go any farther Lady Victoria wishes to be informed just how long you have known Lord Lassington."

Matilda gasped: and went as white as the proverbial sheet—if not paler. For little had she anticipated such an electrifying challenge.

"I—I—," she hesitated: but Lady Sarah impatiently truck in again.

"You needn't waste time thinking out lies: we both know that you and Lord Lassington are acquainted."

So there was no help for it.

But Matilda had been plunged into such an abyss of mazed affright that very literally she could not have told you whether she was occupying the usual upright position

or no. So remarkably did the walls round about her seem to swing and rock.

"I met Lord Lassington—in the spring," she faltered finally.

"But where?" demanded Lady Victoria, whose very natural curiosity was fast becoming uncontrollable.

"In Berkeley Square," returned Matilda laconically if with admirable accuracy.

Lady Sarah frowned.

"You mean you've been to his house?"

This was fresh news even to her.

"Only because I was overturned in a cab at his door, the afternoon I arrived here," Matilda explained.

"An accident! But how romanesque!" sighed the incurably fiction-loving Lady Victoria. "Just like a play."

Matilda sighed and ventured on fuller details.

"He pulled me out of the cab—which had turned over on its side——"

Completely losing sight of the situation as Lady Sarah had taken great pains to stage it, Lady Victoria now allowed her amusement to get the upper hand.

"Oh, little Horsey, how funny it must have been. I wish I'd been there to see it. Did Doodles pull you out of crinoline and all?"

Relieved at her surprisingly friendly attitude, Matilda admitted both the humour and the difficulty of that long-past moment, and added earnestly,

"He was extremely kind, insisted on my coming in to rest after the shock he imagined I had sustained. And he is so difficult to withstand," she confessed. "But I did not know who he was then."

Before Lady Sarah could interpose to prevent her Lady Victoria had, with one of her impulsive movements, laid a kind little hand on the arm of the dejected Miss Horsey.

"Now, don't think we are blaming you," she began: but Lady Sarah viewing this change of mood with consterna-

ton cut in again in her most peremptory manner; endowing her friend with a glance of cold disdain as she did so.

"When did you see him next?" she enquired, adding in a warning tone. "Don't be childish, Torie."

Again Matilda was conscious of an undercurrent of purpose and intrigue in the air of both girls which alarmed her.

"I saw him in the Park," she answered watching their inquisitive faces nervously. "I happened to be walking along by the Row—and he was riding there."

Lady Sarah nodded: the admission tallied with her own knowledge and suspicions exactly.

"About the time I saw you with him at the watchmaker's. Now what were you doing there?"

This was, Matilda thought, an absolutely unpardonable prying into her affairs that she resented but dared not openly contend with: so once more she hesitated, flushed up, and took refuge in silence.

"We are waiting, Miss Horsey," observed Lady Sarah with cold emphasis.

"He was kind enough to help me choose a watch."

"For which he paid, of course."

Her cheeks flaming at this outrage Matilda flew up from her chair.

"No, no," she cried, "never would I have permitted it. Indeed, Lady Sarah, you quite mistake——"

But Lady Sarah continued coldly complacent at having got within Matilda's guard as she considered.

"No, I don't," she retorted pointing an accusatory and dramatic forefinger at Matilda. "For this, Torie, is the creature in pink with whom Doodles was so taken at your mother's masked ball the other night. And I, myself, saw him making very pretty love to her out in the garden."

With widely open eyes and mouth Lady Victoria sat gasping—there is no other word for it—and remained speechlessly gazing at Matilda; who, her hand on the back of the chair, stood confronting her judges; with crimson

cheeks certainly, but less overcome at the bursting of Lady Sarah's bomb than that young person had secretly anticipated.

In fact she was the first of the trio to break the hushed silence.

"You quite mistake, Lady Sarah," and her tone was as peremptory as that fair inquisitor's own, "Lord Lassington has no reason to imagine——"

"Stop!" cried Lady Victoria who had at last found her voice.

Both heads turned in her direction enquiringly.

"Yes?" said Matilda.

"Do you mean to say you came down to our ball?"

Matilda bowed her head.

"And danced?"

"Several times," admitted Matilda sadly.

Whereupon Lady Victoria subsided on to the nearest seat, her limbs refusing to bear her up any longer, and laughed and laughed till both Matilda and Lady Sarah were afraid of hysterics.

"You little wretch—Horsey," she gulped. "If Mama had found you out—but oh, what a lark, oh, what an amazing lark."

"That's all very well," interrupted Lady Sarah impatiently. "But what's the good of wasting precious time like this? Do you, or do you not, want to marry Doodles on Thursday?"

Matilda gazed dumbly from one speaker to the other her head more in a whirl than ever on hearing this astounding question; and Lady Victoria stopped dead in the middle of a peal.

"No," she replied firmly.

"Then," returned Lady Sarah becoming extremely businesslike. "Now we'll come to the point. Sit down, Miss Horsey, and draw your chair closer, if you please."

And after bringing a stool to Matilda's side, on which she plumped, she began to formulate to that distracted soul the

most extraordinary change of plan that the mind of a chief bridesmaid ever conceived as far as a fashionable wedding was concerned.

Her preamble was short but full of weighty matter.

"First," she said, "you have really behaved atrociously, however Victoria may encourage you. And if the Duchess knew, you'd be sent packing: bear that in mind if you please. Also I saw Lord Lassington kiss you——"

"I couldn't help that," retorted Matilda, stung to defiance by the animosity of Lady Sarah's manner. "He's a very strong and determined character. But he knew directly afterwards how annoyed I was."

"And much he cared—I know Doodles," chipped in Lady Victoria flippantly. "All the same it does seem the oddest thing he should fall in love with a goosie little chit like you."

"Oh, but you're mistaken," returned Matilda blushing deeply.

"And now," went on Lady Sarah, not taking the slightest notice of either Matilda's assurance or her friend's disparaging comment: "And now you are to have the chance to marry him—if you have the pluck."

Matilda jumped to her feet.

"What!" she cried. "What did you say?"

With her strong right arm Lady Sarah pulled her to a sitting posture again.

"I've got it all arranged: listen to me——"

And for the next half hour Matilda was forced to lend an attentive if shrinking ear—at first in violent opposition, then in a quiescent apathy which stole over her more and more, and at last in a mute acquiescence—to the calm, clear voice of the Lady Sarah whose studied periods over-rode and provided for every objection Matilda could bring to her imperious plannings.

"So you see," she ended, "you can just choose. Do what we want and everything will come out all right in the end or Doodles is ridiculously in love. And so are you—no

matter how many fibs you may tell. Refuse—and we go straight to Her Grace. And by tonight you'll be out in the world, and without a character, either."

Thus ended the peroration of that astute character reader Lady Sarah Hemerton: and on the one chord that set Matilda's brain sounding terrible possibilities of dire catastrophe. And which, in the end, rendered her as helpless as a newly fledged bird in the presence of a couple of hungry boa constrictors.

"We'll give you your choice, till this evening," she concluded drily. "But we know what we would advise you to do."

And on this threatening note the interview ended.

Feeling as if she had been tossed about in the very heart of a cyclone for countless æons Matilda finally staggered away: her eyes glazing and her head swimming with the magnitude of the decision she must come to so immediately and uncompromisingly.

Alone with her friend Lady Victoria cast a pensive glance at the door through which their exhausted prey had passed.

"Well, Sally?" she whispered.

Lady Sarah permitted a brief smile to soften her stern aspect and began a renewed search for the forgotten Turkish Delight.

"She'll do it all right," she returned tranquilly. "The girl adores him: and I believe she'll make quite a decent looking bride. So tonight you can give her her final instructions without any danger of her backing out. And now we'll go down to lunch, Torie. I can't find your horrid sweets—that was a good morning's work, say what you like, my dear."

CHAPTER XVII

IS A PERFECTLY FAITHFUL RECORD OF WHAT HAPPENED
TO MATILDA ON LADY VICTORIA'S WEDDING DAY

THE dawn of Lady Victoria's wedding day found two extremely worked up young women under the roof of Tilney House, each sitting up in bed, communing with themselves after an almost sleepless night. And to both of these young ladies the hours before them loomed up portentous and terrific indeed.

Yet in spite of much natural apprehension, dread, fear, or fright, both were determined to go forward on the chosen path and hoped for a happy issue to the events of the day.

For Matilda after much struggling had resigned herself to Fate's directing, and Lady Victoria was more joyfully anticipative of future content than she had been for some time past.

Further, was not the plan to be followed fresh from the fashioning of Lady Sarah and consequently almost perfect in design?

Courage, then—*tam Marte quam Minerva*.

In all the bustle and confusion of the early hours of this memorable day in the house of Westmainham the sudden and regrettable illness of so unimportant a member of the household as Miss Matilda Horsey escaped quite unremarked; except by those few persons whose daily duties took them within her very circumscribed orbit.

For Matilda, a darkened room and a sacrificed breakfast were the first steps she had been bidden to take.

Later a visit of ceremony from the intrigued Ladies

Caroline and Charlotte sufficed to spread the news that their preceptress, being far from well, was compelled to abandon all idea of playing an active rôle of any sort for the next few hours. This rumour even reached the exalted ears of the Duchess herself. But beyond a moment's genuine regret that her little governess should be laid low so inconveniently and on such a gala day she gave it no attention: other and more weighty matters occupying her mind.

It remained for Hortense tip-toeing in with a light drink to Matilda's room, for that invalid's consumption about ten o'clock in the morning, to voice the general feeling of commiseration at her state of health.

"*Mon Dieu*," she sighed sympathetically, "to think you should be so unfortunate as to have so severe a bilious attack today of all days. What a calamity! There is not one person in the house who does not feel for you. But repose and starvation are the only remedies, my poor child."

"Yes," assented Matilda faintly, lying with her face turned to the wall, "I suppose so."

"And you must have no visitors," continued Hortense. "Luckily the little girls have already gone to put on their frocks—and so all will be quiet up here. But a bilious attack and just now—I ask you!"

Matilda sighed deeply, moving restlessly on her pillows.

"I know it's very unromantic," she admitted, "and I should have preferred to be allowed to choose a less prosy illness."

Amusedly Hortense smiled at this quaint idea.

"One does not choose any illness," she replied kindly enough. "But it is a real disaster that you will not be present at this wedding."

Matilda made no reply.

"And there is Miladi Victoria looking her prettiest. *Tiens*, she sent you a charming message, *chérie*."

Into Matilda's face crept an apprehensive look: what, she wondered, could Lady Victoria wish to impart to her at this late hour?

"Yes?" she asked.

"It is that, if she has time, she will come up to you in her wedding dress, and show you herself before she departs for the church. I call that *bien mignonne* of her."

"How long before she starts?" murmured Matilda and Hortense threw a glance across the room at the clock on the mantelpiece.

"Half an hour, possibly," she answered; and busied herself in making the languid and extremely unresponsive invalid as comfortable as she could.

Then with a final shaking up of her pillows and a tucking her up she dropped the lightest of kisses on Matilda's tumbled hair and softly went out of the room.

"I shall come and see you the moment I arrive back from the church," she promised: and the door shut upon her.

Motionless, but listening intently, Matilda remained for another ten minutes: then the sound of a hurried step along the passage leading to her room sent her flying out of bed and when the door burst most unceremoniously open she was already seated at her dressing-table doing her hair with frantic haste.

Lady Victoria, a wonderfully fair and radiant vision in her wedding gown, her lace veil thrown back from her face for the moment, her heavy satin train caught up on her arm, bouquet and gloves held in her right hand, halted on the threshold of Matilda's room just long enough to cry in her very clearest tones, for the benefit of anyone in the vicinity.

"Poor little Horsey: it's too bad. But I've come to show you myself. How do I look?"

And then the door shut on her with decision.

Down in the elaborately decorated hall Mr. Bartie, a very statue of restrained expectancy, and his satellites splendid in liveries of ceremony, waited for at least another twenty minutes, "cooling their heels whilst dooced queer things were going on upstairs," as he afterwards ex-

pressed it, before, leaning on the arm of her amiable if stupid kinsman, Sir George Asshington, the bride at last came into view: treading lightly and hurriedly down the staircase, her face almost entirely concealed by the heavy pattern of the ample Brussels lace veil she had at the last moment decided to please her mother by wearing.

Later on that same day Mr. Bartie remarked very pertinently that "pleasing her mama so suddenly had ought to have been looked into." But this was when the events of Lady Victoria's wedding were rapidly becoming a nine days' wonder.

With bent head and with a curiously timid air for a West-mainham she floated out to the carriage and getting in with her escort was driven off in all the state and panoply that was her due.

"And I've lost my bet," said Mr. Bartie staring after the gorgeous equipage with its prancing bays, its hammer-cloth box seat and bewigged coachman: its powdered footmen behind and general effect of armorial bearings, much glass, and more gilt and nose-gays.

This thought was still uppermost on his return to his pantry: and he was about to pour himself out a glass of sherry—the very best Amontillado—with which to mitigate his sense of disappointment when his eye fell on an extremely trim figure walking quickly away from the house across the courtyard: it having apparently issued unnoticed from a side door.

"Blest if it ain't the little governess," thought Mr. Bartie: and had enough curiosity, decanter in hand, to go to the window and watch her well out of the precincts of Tilney House.

If only the half-formed idea that entered his head of the figure's likeness to the bride then driving to Saint George's had struck him to any purpose.

But remembrance coming to his aid that the little governess, rumour said, had been suffering with of all things a bilious attack, Mr. Bartie, after a second's not too careful

rutiny, merely concluded that she had recovered enough to try to make her way to the church, after all, to see something of the ceremony. And, with his first sip of sherry, promptly dismissed her from his mind.

Meanwhile, rather to the surprise of her kinsman, who might be a shade blind but certainly was not deaf, the bride sat in utter silence till the short journey over, the carriage drew up with a clatter and swing at the very church door itself.

"Nervous, poor little gal," reflected the kindly Sir George as he prepared to help her out and felt her hand tremble in his.

To the dense crowd congregated on the steps and round about Saint George's she seemed a wonderful but almost shrinking little figure so quickly did she mount the steps to where her bridesmaids—Lady Sarah foremost and composed amongst them—awaited her just within the great central doors.

To Lord Lassington standing at the chancel steps watching his bride as she came up the aisle, veiled and crowned with orange blossom, her head down-drooped over the formal bouquet of flowers he had that morning sent her, her train held up by George—a puffing goods' train indeed—and followed by the exceedingly demure Ladies Caroline and Charlotte, as also six other older bridesmaids—to Lord Lassington for one mad moment came the thought could it only have been another small figure advancing to him down the long perspective of pews, what an unimaginable joy had been his.

And then he opened and shut his eyes with extraordinary rapidity: for, no doubt insanely enough, he fancied that Victoria looked absurdly like that other dear child whose presence could never more mean anything to him—as she herself had insisted.

"Where was she now?" he wondered.

But the pealing of the organ and the rising of the congregation swept his odd fancy from him.

Victoria—and Victoria alone—was coming every second closer: to be married to him.

With an indescribable tightening of his heartstrings Lord Lassington pulled himself together; and took a step or two forward to meet her.

Duly he took his place by her side—and the service commenced.

"I, Christopher Maurice, take thee, Victoria Adelaide——"

The bridegroom's voice rang out clear and strong: but when it came to the moment for the bride to pledge her vows Lady Victoria, to everyone's astonishment—except the vigilant Lady Sarah—became from sheer nervousness quite inaudible.

"Very unlike Torie's usual way," reflected the bridegroom as he put the ring on her trembling hand and felt a sudden rush of tender concern invade him. "Poor little soul: it's an ordeal for her, after all."

And during the homily which followed he possessed himself of her cold and passive little paw and held it firmly in his.

Almost before he realized it the ceremony was over: they were man and wife.

And he was, the new Marchioness of Lassington on his arm, following the magnificent figures of the officiating Bishop and his two assistant clergy into the vestry.

Hardly had he got inside the door before he was surrounded by a mob of relatives and bridesmaids all talking at the tops of their voices as it seemed to him: and Victoria was torn from his side before he had even a chance to turn to her and lift her veil to give her the traditional first kiss. But round him surged the Ladies Caroline and Charlotte, Lord George, his godfather, the young Duke Frederick, now his brother-in-law and up from Eton on special leave, his best man Fitz-Alan of the Blues, the Duchess his more than contented mother-in-law at last; to say nothing of his Aunts Teresa and Claudine and their husbands, so that the narrow room seemed fairly choked with smiling and

congratulatory people. And beyond the doorway was a moving, eagerly whispering crowd also.

"But I haven't even seen Victoria yet," he cried impatiently: and turned to find her seated by the oak table whereon the registers were placed.

Quickly he bent toward her and taking a corner of the lace veil in his fingers threw it back from her face.

For one terrific moment there was a dead hush as Lord Lassington and every other person in the room stared incredulously at the bride.

Then cried the Lady Charlotte wonderingly:

"That's not Torie."

And Lord George pushing himself into a front row completed the sentence.

"That's my little Horthey," he cried.

Upon which a well-bred pandemonium of talk broke loose; and after that moment the only quiet people in the whole place were Lord Lassington and Matilda.

Down upon them both—eyes blazing—swept the Duchess: decks cleared for action.

"This is one of Victoria's tricks—I might have known. Where is my daughter, you wicked little creature?"

And coming yet closer to Matilda, she was in her anger and chagrin about to give her a good shaking when Lord Lassington, putting out a gently restraining hand, spoke for the first time.

"It seems I have married a changeling," he said, looking deliberately across at Lady Sarah who stood alertly by her Aunt Harriet, watching with an air of detached interest the singular scene.

The Duchess made an impatient movement.

"Here's a pretty kettle of fish," she said, regarding Matilda with coldly hostile looks. "My governess—my nursery governess: and she has had the impudence to go through the ceremony in the place of my daughter."

Matilda felt rather than saw Lord Lassington's start of astonishment: but he still retained his position by her

side, and after a moment let his hand rest lightly on her shoulder.

"But of course the marriage won't stand for a minute," harshly continued Her Grace: and then she turned to the Duc de Lorgny whose glance had been fixed inscrutably on Matilda ever since her veil had been thrown back from her face.

"But what is to be done now, Antoine? Think of all those people gloating in the church there—and outside: I can't—I won't face them. It's too much to ask of me. And where in Heaven's name is Victoria?"

Like lightning she turned on Matilda.

"Speak, you little baggage," she commanded.

But again Matilda's husband—if she dared call him so—interposed.

"Yes," he said, "it would be interesting to know where the volatile Victoria is—probably just finishing the same interesting ceremony I've been through. But it strikes me very forcibly that I have not only acquired a changeling but a dumb wife into the bargain."

And with that he smiled suddenly at Matilda who, still seated, and white as her satin wedding dress, uttered no word in reply—good or bad. For she had had most precise orders from Lady Sarah as to her behaviour till she left the church.

To the dismayed group about her she had the air of an almost lifeless figure except for her eyes which never left the face of her husband for one instant.

"Well," continued the Marquis, "although the thing seems to me highly irregular—and there's obviously been some nasty work at the crossroads—and Heaven knows what my lord Bishop there," and he nodded at the grim prelate on the other side of the oaken table, "thinks of it all: as far as we are concerned there does not seem to be any use in crying over spilt milk. So I suppose we'd better get to work and sign all these books and registers strewed about."

There was a general movement of disapprobation and

astonishment at his matter of fact acceptance of the very remarkable situation in which he found himself, led by his Aunts Teresa and Claudine; whose eloquent periods he cut short. And Lord Fitz-Alan at his shoulder spoke a sentence or two rapidly in a low tone.

"We can't have a scene here," said Lord Lassington firmly.

"You don't mean you're going to stand by this brazen hussy?" said the Duchess. "Doodles—think what you are doing."

Lord Lassington nodded.

"I am thinking—furiously," he replied. "And really I see no other way for it. Who exactly I have to thank for the brilliant trick played on me I don't yet know of course. But I shall find out and give honour where honour is due. But one must respect *les convenances*. And as this is my wedding day," he stressed the pronoun ever so slightly, "I really can't give the congregation out there too much of a sensation—and so, Fitz," he turned to his best man, "if you will be so amiable as to set the customary wires in motion we'll sign and get away from here."

The Duchess went up to the old Duc who up till then had made no move of any kind.

"Is the boy mad?" she demanded.

"On the contrary—very sane, I should say," he replied. "Come, my dear Adelaide," and he offered her his arm, "leave it all to him. It is Christopher's affair now: and when we get back to Tilney House we can arrange things, *n'est-ce-pas, mon cher?*"

He laid his hand on his godson's arm who nodded without speaking.

"And above all," continued the old man with imperturbable suavity in his manner and voice, and now addressing everyone in the vestry, "may I beg that the present company in this room remains discreetly silent for—shall we say?—a little quarter of an hour. At Tilney House everything will be satisfactorily explained."

A general murmur of polite assent followed on his words: and almost before Matilda knew she had signed her own name more than once on pages and in places indicated by the frozen Bishop; and amidst the coldly disapproving looks of every person present—with the exception of Lord George who, independent as usual and seeing Matilda such a statue, took that opportunity of climbing into her lap and kissing her loudly.

"Good little Horthey," he said patting her cheek, "I love you—you look tho pretty."

Lord Lassington shot an odd look across at the child as he affixed his final signature to the registers, and made way for a cloud of witnesses.

"George, you're a treasure: and a valuable friend," he said gravely.

And then he lifted him gently off Matilda's knee.

"But you can't take any more of my wife's time and attention on the present occasion," he ended, as offering Matilda his arm he prepared to lead her from the vestry.

By the door, as the organ pealed out in the already famous Wedding March composed by the genial Herr Mendelssohn—at the instance of the King of Prussia for the Midsummer Night's Dream, Lady Charlotte, her basket of rose petals on her arm, halted the couple anxiously.

"Are we to throw our flowers now?" she asked, holding back her twin with one hand.

Lord Lassington laughed.

"Certainly," he said, "trot along."

And so with the Ladies Caroline and Charlotte diligently strewing her path with rose leaves and Lord George proudly bearing aloft her heavy train, once more and for the last time Matilda passed down the aisle of Saint George's: this time on her husband's arm.

And, as the thrilling chords of the great march crashed overhead, all about her to right and left faces nodded eagerly; and a buzz of unqualified and swelling excitement followed in her wake.

Especially did it quicken when Her Grace of Westmainham appeared on the arm of the slowly smiling Duc de Lorgny, more than usually magnificent and imperial in her bearing.

Out in the summer air the bells pealed their gayest and the crowd cheered good-humouredly at sight of the newly married couple.

For every woman loves a wedding: and there are few men who do not feel a gentleness for the bride standing there between the new life and the old.

"Well," said Lord Lassington leaning back with folded arms as they drove off, in his carriage this time, "for sheer impudent courage that will take some beating—I congratulate you, my lady."

Matilda looked away out of the window, bracing herself for what was to come; but in spite of all her efforts her eyes filled with tears for the strain of the last hour was telling on her.

"And now," the frigid voice beside her went on, "perhaps you will be good enough to explain to me how all this came about."

To Matilda, sitting there clutching her lilies and roses, his composure struck her as more disquieting than any display of temper might have been. And one quick sidelong glance at his sardonic face did not help to set her mind at ease either. For though, armed with patience as he might be, she feared his sang-froid was only a surface affair. And certainly to her he had the air of a very angry man; or at least that was the impression she received.

Well, she supposed, a certain amount of wrath was only natural: provocation there had been enough, and more than enough, goodness knew. But relying on Lady Sarah's forceful assurances that his affections must stand the test to which they had been put, Matilda allowed herself to hope that before long she might be able to overcome his austerity. And after all he had assured her passionately of his deep and abiding affection for her not so very long ago. With

these thoughts uppermost she was about to embark on a careful recital of the events that had led up to such sensational behaviour on her part, when she found that he was speaking again.

"And by the bye," said he, "what was your name, after all?"

"My name is Horsey," she answered in a very faint voice.

"Ah," returned Lord Lassington, "and is the Duchess's statement correct? That you were, in her establishment, an instructor of youth?"

Matilda, sighing, nodded.

"Yes: just a nursery governess, I am afraid."

"Not even a finishing one," commented her new lord pensively, relapsing into a collected silence.

"Well—glorious fools you've made of us all, Matilda Hope," he summed up finally, thereby causing her to sigh deeply again.

Ruefully she assented—seeing no other way for it. For since the events of the morning appeared to him in that light (the chief sufferer) everyone else would, Matilda imagined, come to the very same conclusion sooner or later.

"And she admits it," he said with a curt laugh that did not entirely cloak a deep mortification.

"I suppose," ventured Matilda, "fools do rush in, as they tell us, where angels fear to tread——"

"And are successful nine times out of ten."

This was a heartening thought.

"But it wasn't so difficult as I expected," confessed Matilda.

"That's because poor old George Asshington is as blind as a bat."

"But you weren't—," began Matilda: and then stopped short in dismay at what her words might seem to imply.

Lord Lassington looked away and out of the window in his turn: and for the first time an expression that was not thoroughly displeased crossed his face.

"Your hand didn't feel quite like Victoria's, I'll admit—when I held it during that most edifying discourse my lord Bishop treated us to. I hope you made a note of it."

"I never heard a word."

"Pity—pity," he returned regretfully, "the good man held very sound views as to a wife's duty."

The carriage now swinging round a corner Lord Lassington withdrew his gaze from the outside world to turn it on Matilda once more.

"Of course Victoria put you up to the whole thing—ably seconded if not captained by that mischievous baggage, Sarah Hemerton. One of these days I shall, I hope, return with interest Madam Sally's kind efforts on my behalf. But what beats me is, what made you do it?"

Matilda met a glance that was both stern and cold and which caused her to withdraw her own look extremely precipitately.

"Love it was not," he continued with an increasing harshness, "for you never could have treated me so badly, or dreamed of making me such a laughingstock as you have done today."

Conscious of a growing distress Matilda murmured that she had not thought of such a thing as making him an object of ridicule.

"No, you don't any of you seem to have done much thinking; and as to the consequences of your actions or the result of them on others—" A significant gesture finished the sentence.

"And so you are very angry with me," whispered Matilda.

"Very," said Lord Lassington.

With a crash Matilda's hopes fell in ruins about her.

"And I suppose—you will never forgive——"

"Or forget it," he ended in so cutting a tone that Matilda nearly broke down. Indeed one bright tear did fall sparkling amongst the lilies of the valley in her bouquet.

"What am I to do then?" she whispered after a pause which seemed to her endless.

"Why," he returned briskly, "remember you are my wife now—at any rate for the moment——"

"And you don't love me any more?" pursued Matilda determined to be quite sure of her ground this time before she began to think things out for herself.

"What do you think?" asked Lord Lassington.

Frankly to this question Matilda found it impossible to reply; for she really did not know what opinion she should hold. One thing she knew, Lady Sarah's prognostications were coming out all wrong.

"At any rate you are my wife," he repeated, "and until we see just how legal this ceremony is I must beg that you do not let your sense of the dramatic get the better of you. Also let me remind you that you set the course yourself, Matilda Hope, so now you cannot blame me for holding you to it. Therefore we are going to proceed with the day's arrangements as planned by Her Grace. And mind, I expect no shirking from you."

For several moments he waited for a reply, but as Matilda's head continued obstinately turned away, he proceeded with his instructions.

"One thing I will tell you," he continued, "before we reach Tilney House. Whether you are legally my wife or not has nothing to do with it, and whether I decide to stand by this absurd marriage or not—is not the question: but I am furious with you and you may as well know it. And I almost think I hate you, Matilda Hope: and at present I almost wish I had left you in that cab."

Matilda raised her head at last and eyed him as irately as he had just permitted himself to regard her.

"So do I," she cried passionately. "And I want to say something, too."

"That," her husband could not forbear remarking, "is of course only fair. What is sauce for the gander should be——"

Matilda made a quick movement eloquent of impatience.

"I don't want any old proverbs hurled at my head, and what I want to say is this," she cried, "Lady Sarah was all wrong. And you said you loved me that night of the ball—and I believed you——"

"You didn't behave as if you did, if my recollection serves me," he interposed drily.

"You said you couldn't live without me, you know you did: and you couldn't go on with your intended marriage. And I believed that, too. And when Lady Victoria showed me how miserable she was, and said she'd die rather than marry you—I believed you both."

And Matilda took a deep breath.

"Now, I wish I had let you both be miserable: and get married to each other. It would have done you all the good in the world."

A chuckle was all the answer she received to this outburst; and after reflecting upon it Lord Lassington chuckled again and remarked, "That is as may be."

A moment later the carriage turned into the Tilney House courtyard and both young people pulled themselves together.

"Here we are," said the bridegroom hurriedly. "Now mind, my lady, there's to be no nonsense now; you took the risk and you must play the game to the end—whatever it may be."

For the first time Matilda met his look and with, to his astonishment, the smile of a sphinx.

"You will not have to complain of me," she assured him as the carriage drew up before the hall door.

The unconscious Mr. Bartie was the first person to receive the full impact of the staggering discovery that now awaited the entire household—which had not been able to attend the ceremony at Saint George's.

"Lord 'a mussy," he muttered as he stared blankly after the bride moving down the hall on her unsmiling husband's arm.

"Lord 'a mussy," he repeated and then a light broke over his moon face, "I've won my bet. And he's got the little governess, by George. Here's a pretty to-do."

But, the house becoming immediately invaded by the first batch of arriving wedding guests, and thereafter a constant stream flowing in, his work grew more and more onerous; and he was unable to do more than send a hasty message to Mrs. Lake acquainting her with the bare fact, that something had happened to the bride for Lady Victoria it was not.

At intervals shaking his head, and wondering audibly what the world was coming to, he retired to his pantry there to restore his shocked susceptibilities.

Meanwhile from mouth to mouth the news had spread: and when, at last, Lord Lassington took his place with Matilda under the fragrant marriage bell of blossom which hung suspended between two of the windows overlooking the garden, conjecture and comment were at their height.

Flanked by the grim Duchess and his suave godfather he stood receiving the congratulations of friends and acquaintances who hardly knew in what terms to frame them.

But the Duc de Lorgny took the situation in hand.

Benignly he gazed upon Matilda and then raised his hand for silence, after beckoning to his side a footman with glasses and champagne on a tray.

"Although I know this is a little irregular," he began, "I am going to ask you all to drink a toast to our young couple here of a rather unusual kind. But the occasion has as you can all see unusual aspects about it. First of all however—Her Grace and Lord Lassington," in turn he made a set bow to both, "have asked me to undertake an explanation to you of what has just surprised us all so much."

There was, on these words of his, an involuntary murmur of excusable inquiry and solicitude from the assembly, as each guest received a glass of wine from the deftly moving servants and waited for the continuation of the Duc de Lorgny's speech.

"As you see," and he made a smiling gesture towards Matilda, "as you see our little bride of today is not—Lady Victoria. She has, at the last moment, impulsively followed the dictates of her heart—and who shall blame her—and has this morning married, by special licence, Sir John Marlow, whom we all know and like; and who, as you are most of you aware, is under orders to proceed almost immediately to the Crimea."

He paused to let the information sink in before he proceeded, still smiling genially at Matilda as he did so:

"This young lady—who met my godson under very romantic circumstances recently—and between whom there has been for some little time an increasing affection—was persuaded by Lady Victoria to take her place."

The announcement set a ripple of uncontrollable amusement and comment afloat in the room.

"You must not blame too much the impulsive notions of young ladies albeit they are seventeen, and arrived, supposedly, at years of discretion," continued the Duc. "Certainly the audacity of youth sometimes succeeds in cutting intricate knots which older people hesitate to touch. At any rate, I think I can affirm with perfect truth that my godson does not under the circumstances entirely regret the change of brides."

Here his speech was completely halted by a ringing and spontaneous outburst of applause; alike friends and relations being only too relieved at the attitude he was urging them to assume towards the young couple, and more than ready to follow his very astute leading.

But the old gentleman had not ended what he had to say and raising his hand for silence continued blandly—thereby perhaps giving his hearers the greatest sensation of that day of surprises.

"As to who this young lady is," he resumed slowly, watching narrowly the effect of his words on that little group of near and powerful relatives to both houses clustered close at hand and to whom his announcement he was

well aware would occasion as much amazement as even the veriest stranger present could feel—so little did they guess what was coming.

“As to this young lady—I have a confession to make. One which will be quite as much a source of wonderment to her as to you.”

This declaration set Matilda gazing fixedly at the old gentleman; and full as he was of the avowal on which he was about to launch, her deprecating and tristful expression awoke in him an odd sense of uneasiness for which he was not able to account. Alone of all those about her he remarked her make that undecided movement towards her husband—that half catch at his arm—which Lassington, his attention completely claimed by his godfather, did not notice. However the thought flashed on him and faded out of his mind as he continued his announcement.

“The new Marchioness of Lassington is my granddaughter,” he said with meticulous distinctness of utterance.

Of the effect of his words there was no doubt whatever: it was dynamic and impressive to the last degree: for hardly had he spoken the final syllable when a perfect babel of talk arose upon the air. Everybody it seemed had some comment to make.

At his side Lord Lassington heard, very astonishingly to him, a swiftly repressed gurgle, of genuinely delighted laughter, or he was very much mistaken. But when he looked down at Matilda to verify this impression, and to suggest to her that such weighty news deserved a graver reception, he found she was standing there regarding her new self-confessed relative with an enigmatical expression, in which mere politeness predominated, on her inscrutable little face.

With an earnestness of manner foreign to him the Duc de Lorgny took up his narrative.

“But this I only learnt a few days ago, and I had not reached the fitting occasion to make myself known to her. To most of you who recollect the circumstances under

which my only child—some nineteen years back—chose a husband, explanations will be hardly necessary.”

His glance fell gently on Matilda once more as he concluded with marked deliberation:

“But I hope and believe that there may be many happy years in store for us in which I may be permitted to show this dear girl the affection and care of the head of her house.”

He lifted high in the air his brimming glass.

“I ask you all to drink to the change of brides—to my granddaughter Mathilde Espérance, Marchioness of Lassington.”

With a promptitude that did them all credit the toast was honoured by everyone present. In many cases with openly expressed relief at this satisfactory clearing up of what had threatened to develop into a most distressing scandal, which from its very nature could not have been concealed from society at large. The younger people headed by Frederick, Duke of Westmainham, drank it enthusiastically because it appealed strongly to their sense of the dramatic and romantical. The middle-aged and more cynical because the whole affair had a tang to it that fashionable weddings rarely discover: and it was going to make a most excellent story in drawing-rooms and clubs for many a long day. Therefore each person drained his or her glass wholeheartedly, and moved up to the bridal pair to say the expected pretty thing in the most approved of fashion.

Mr. Bartie's sonorous announcement that the wedding breakfast was served alone halted these flowing and flowery periods.

And with the newly married couple at its head the procession reformed and made its way into the dining-room.

Here, for more than two hours, Matilda sat eating not at all; but faintly smiling on every man, woman, and child there who gave her the slightest look of encouragement.

And playing her part of petted bride so lightly that even the Duchess, whose wrath still simmered, had to admit the minx had poise and charm. And Lord Lassington, angry as he had been, with his pride stung to the quick, found himself once again rapidly falling under her spell. So much so that when the moment came for her to retire with her bridesmaids to change her dress for her wedding journey he was conscious of a feeling of almost ardent anticipation that surprised him a good deal. He remembered with humorous satisfaction, too, that for the first time in their chequered acquaintance Matilda could not, as had been her habit, suddenly vanish—and he be forced to let her go.

Up in the dressing-room that had been set aside for him he made final careful arrangements with his godfather.

"You will travel to Dover now," said the Duc, "that seems to be the best way out: and tomorrow I will myself bring down a special licence and you can be remarried just to be on the completely safe side. But Christopher, you are quite determined on this point, you wish to remain married?"

Lord Lassington took a turn up and down the room.

"Quite," he returned, "I do not see myself letting her go now that I have got her."

The old man standing by the window polished his eyeglass thoughtfully.

"She's exactly like her mother," he said softly. "No one was able to resist Antoinette long—and it seems that this little chit has inherited the same trick."

Lord Lassington came to a stand before the Duc.

"But," he assured him, "I am not going to give in all at once."

Fitting his eyeglass most carefully into his eye the old gentleman regarded the rash warrior shrewdly.

"If I might venture to offer a word of counsel, Christopher, I should suggest that you do not overdo the heavy father effect, *mon vieux*. That was my mistake with Antoinette, and, believe me, it will sit much worse on so new

husband as you are. The women of our house cannot bear to listen to lectures."

Lord Lassington shrugged his shoulders: and proceeded to explain that he found his new wife so fascinating when he got angry that he could not forbear, as he expressed it, from "raising her dander."

"A dangerous diversion," returned the Duc.

"Well, you must admit she owes me a bit," laughed Matilda's new lord.

Amidst a scene of the greatest enthusiasm, as the fashionable chroniclers put it next day, he drove away with Matilda some twenty minutes later—bound for the Bricklayers Arms Station and Dover.

"The Lord be praised, that's over," said he as they turned a corner and the shrill cheering died away behind them.

"Yes," said Matilda.

"And although I am far from entirely pleased with you, Matilda Hope, at the same time I'm also rather proud of you," he continued.

"I'm so glad," returned Matilda sweetly. "But I wish," she added after a moment, "I had never done it."

Her husband regarded her with a provoking cheerfulness that in her then state of mind irritated her more than she could say: and when he went on to suggest that they should make the best of a bad bargain, Matilda took it quite seriously and grew more annoyed with him than ever. In spite of all she could not honestly consider herself a merely bad bargain: and she was about to comment somewhat acidly on this statement of his when he spoke again, setting her thoughts in an entirely new channel.

"By the way," said Lord Lassington, "had you the least idea of what my godfather was going to say?"

"That he was my grandfather?"

"Yes," returned her husband.

"Of course not," replied Matilda coldly. "And what is more I don't for one moment believe it."

"Then, I did hear you laugh."

Matilda nodded.

"I can't understand why he told such a fib—how could anybody believe him? I thought it funny—quite funny. And I still do."

This attitude of sturdy disbelief rather left Lord Lassington at a loss; what to say in rebuttal he hardly knew, Matilda seemed so determined. Finally he decided to drop the subject for the moment, as he knew now that she would receive more than enough proof in the next day or so.

"My godfather must himself convince you," he said, "but it's quite true."

Matilda tossed her head.

"I don't want to hear one word about it," she retorted. "Today has been a very watery Sabbath for me, as old Silas used to say. I used to wonder what he meant by that—and now I know. Besides my head aches—and I don't really care who I am."

Lord Lassington reached across and took Matilda's hands in his.

"Poor baby," he said, "you've had a terribly trying day, and you have behaved like a little Trojan."

"But it will soon be over now," murmured Matilda: and the station looming suddenly up before them she said no more.

As in a dream she followed her husband docilely enough to the carriage reserved for them on the Dover train. Already a little crowd of officials had congregated near the door, where Lord Fitz-Alan awaited them: carrying out with military exactness the last of his duties as best man.

Still wearing that deceptive air of meek fatigue Matilda permitted herself to be handed into the carriage and took a seat in the farther corner sinking back with closed eyes as soon as she was well seated. In deference to her obvious wish to be left, at any rate for the moment, alone, Lord Lassington strode to the other end of the compartment and

leaning out of the window began a final cheery interchange of badinage with his friend.

It wanted three minutes to the hour, when the train would start.

Matilda looked round cautiously, deciding that it must be now or never.

Her husband's broad back filled very completely and tactfully the door opposite to that by which she sat, all around a babel of sound prevented any movement of hers from being heard by him.

She looked out of the window; mercifully the up line was entirely empty—and beyond lay a deserted platform.

Like a flash her hand sought the handle of the door, this was fortunately unlocked.

One last look compounded of mischief, satisfaction, despair, courage, sorrow, and relief she threw behind her.

Softly the handle turned, softly the door opened a thread—an inch—then more widely.

And Matilda slipped out.

The door shut with a little bang as the whistle sounded and the train began to move.

Lord Lassington exchanged a final word with his best man and as the platform slipped by waved at him.

The train gathered momentum.

Gaily the bridegroom turned towards——

“By gad,” cried Lord Lassington sitting down plump on the seat. “By gad—if she hasn't done it again. Gone away!”

CHAPTER XVIII.

RECOUNTS HOW THE DUCHESS RECEIVED AN UNLOOKED-
FOR VISITOR: AND HOW MR. FRANCIS FOUND
HIMSELF THE CENTRE OF THE STORM

TO Mrs. Kincaid, setting the finishing touches to Her Grace's toilette in the evening of what had turned out to be so disastrous a day for the Duchess and all her hopes, the ducal skies were growing more lowering than ever. For Lady Victoria's final escapade was obviously going to find short shrift and stern judgment as far as her mother was concerned.

"Yes," the Duchess had repeated with iron resolve more than once, "Victoria may do what she likes henceforth, but I do not wish to see her again or to be plagued with her any more. A girl who can behave with the duplicity she has shown——"

A gesture of disdain rounded off the sentence.

"She has chosen her path; let her now walk down it. I won't allow her a penny. And you, Kincaid, will please to have her things packed up and sent over to Sir John's town house as soon as may be—for I have done with her."

Mrs. Kincaid was distressed to perceive so much resolution in her mistress's air, but she felt the time was not ripe for any peacemaking efforts on her part.

The Duchess picked up her watch from the dressing-table, consulted it, and laughed shortly.

"Both bridal pairs should be at Dover now," she said with grim humour, "I hope they meet."

Mrs. Kincaid permitted herself piously to hope that Providence would step in to prevent an encounter of any kind.

"And to think," added the Duchess viciously—now nearly ready to sally forth to the first engagement of that evening clad in all her war-paint as she herself put it—"And to think that that little baggage, that sly hussy, that prim governess of mine, has romped off with the richest parti in the kingdom—and he means to stick to her."

Wrathfully her eyes sought those of the discreet Mrs. Kincaid who uttered none of her thoughts on the subject aloud.

"It's too appalling to contemplate," the Duchess went on. "And I have no doubt there isn't a woman in town tonight who is not laughing at me. However I don't intend to let anyone pity me about it—Victoria may have won—but nobody is going to pity me in my hearing."

There was so much fire in her look that Mrs. Kincaid cast a glance of utter approval in the direction of the speaker. This was a determination on her mistress's part that she could perfectly understand, and with which she could sympathize.

"So I'm going to, at least, three crushes tonight. And let anybody dare to be sorry for me. How do I look, Janet?"

Her Grace finished with an unconcern that was not entirely artificial, and Mrs. Kincaid studied the figure before her thoughtfully.

"You look wonderful," she answered at last, and there was pure admiration in her voice.

"Not a grieving parent, at any rate, or a disappointed hag, eh?"

"No one could say that," returned the maid decidedly, still eyeing the magnificent figure that Her Grace was bent on presenting to the inquisitive gaze of the world that evening.

A cœur vaillant rien d'impossible—the ancient motto sprang appositely enough into Mrs. Kincaid's mind.

For robed in a gown of deep purple brocade shot with silver threads, over an immense crinoline, such as the new Empress of the French had recently made so popular, the

deep lace of it's berth a caught up on her shoulders with diamond butterflies, and half hiding the ribbon of an order; her massive tiara alight with a thousand fiery gleams at every stately movement of her head; the firm column of her throat encircled with a necklace that was literally worth a king's ransom, as the saying goes, she sat there enthroned in her great armchair, one satin slipper resting on a round bead-worked stool, the very picture of embodied courage and resolution.

Not for one moment, Mrs. Kincaid realized, would she allow anyone to come close enough to know how deeply she had felt and was still feeling the events of that day, or what a blow Lady Victoria had dealt her mother.

"I cannot imagine," continued the Duchess reflectively, "what put that hare-brained scheme into Victoria's head, at the last moment. For the last day or so she has seemed so very pleased with herself and everything. Possibly that is where I should have been warned. I will say one thing for little Horsey, she let Victoria down very lightly. No matter how much we questioned her when we got back from Saint George's, she explained, on the whole, little or nothing."

"She would," returned the maid, "the bairn has an excellent heart." And then she added, taking refuge in a free quotation of a Scriptural character for the point she wished to make: "The dramatics were the voice of Esau," she remarked thoughtfully, "but aiblins the stage management was the hand of Jacob."

"Meaning?" questioned Her Grace with an appreciative if wry smile.

"Lady Sarah has been about a good bit lately."

The Duchess turned sharply on hearing this, and with the air of one who has just lighted on an extremely important but unpleasing discovery, begged Mrs. Kincaid to be so good as to speak out and not to trouble to wrap up her meaning in trite parables under a mistaken notion that she was saving her from any distress or discomfort, as she

thanked Heaven she was still equal to bearing a good deal.

"I'm thinking Lady Sarah had a lot to do with it then," returned Mrs. Kincaid. "And Lady Victoria with her mind on her old sweetheart was just wax in her hands."

This new and blinding light caused the Duchess to blink both physically and mentally; for never had she given a thought to Lady Sarah.

"I simply can't believe it, Kincaid," she began. "But if it turns out to be so I shall consider it the greatest piece of impudence I ever came across in the whole of my life——"

She was about to continue in the same irate vein when a sharp knock on the door put a stop to her caustic remarks for the moment.

"See who is there," she said. "I won't be disturbed unless it's something very important."

Mrs. Kincaid went over to the door, and opening it not too widely, entered into a low-voiced colloquy with some unseen messenger standing in the passage.

A second later she returned to the Duchess with deep concern written on her face.

"The puir lamb," she began, "that puir bairn has run away now, Your Grace, and she's all by herself this night in this great city."

The Duchess stared at her.

"Who?" she demanded. "Not Victoria, I trust."

"And the Marquis is downstairs and fair distraught and would speak with you."

Again the Duchess spoke.

"Who? Do you mean Victoria, or do you not?"

"No, no," returned Mrs. Kincaid. "It's the little new Marchioness, puir lamb."

Across the Duchess's face there now flitted an enigmatic expression.

"Ah," said she, "so these silly sheep are still at it. You can say that I will go to him at once."

Which she did with a promptitude that did her heart

credit, for Lord Lassington, pacing up and down the length and breadth of the great gloomy library, was almost at the end of his fortitude.

Swiftly the Duchess came up to him both hands outstretched: exhaling a most comfortable atmosphere of cheerful assurance.

"My dear boy," she cried, "why are you here? What is this I hear now?"

The young man raised a haggard look to hers and then took both her hands in his.

"Aunt Adelaide," he said, "she's run away from me: and Heaven alone knows where she's gone. And as far as I know she has no money, and no clothes: and she is as innocent as a baby—anything might happen to her."

The Duchess took him by the arm and led him unresistingly to a sofa.

"Come and sit down," she said, "come, my dear boy," and she patted the cushion beside her invitingly. And with a sigh Lord Lassington obeyed her.

"Now," began the Duchess in a brisk and matter-of-fact way, "that moving picture you can at once dismiss from your mind, Doodles. We have it on the very best authority that no harm ever comes to drunkards or fools, or again lunatics: and it seems to me that your today's bargain is a plain fool."

Gloomily Lord Lassington stared in front of him.

"I hope to Heaven you are not right," he said.

"But why did you come to me?" demanded Her Grace with a swift look at his averted head. "What makes you think I can be of any use to you?"

"You are the only soul who knows anything about her," he cried.

Maternally the Duchess patted him on the arm.

"I believe it would be much better for you if you never saw the little slut again: for something tells me she is going to lead you a dance now."

This prophecy caused Lord Lassington to assume a yet

more dejected mien. "No doubt," he admitted, adding that already Matilda Hope had started on her quadrilles, as it were.

"It'll be a fandango before you have finished," warned the Duchess with a laugh, "but I suppose she's got you fast in the toils—though how she's done it, goodness knows."

Miss Horsey's husband shot the Duchess a look wherein a variety of contradictory emotions seemed to mingle.

"Matilda Hope works like the lightning stroke—one flash and you're done for," he said after a thoughtful pause; whereat, sorry as she was for his distress, the Duchess could not help chuckling.

"Ah, well," she returned; and her tone was that of a woman who makes due allowance for that weak vessel—man. "She must have put in a good deal of work: one way and another."

"Yes, she's got an amazing way with her," remarked her victim dreamily.

The Duchess could assent to this with deep conviction from the very bottom of her heart.

"And if," she continued, "I were not a wise and experienced female, I should doubtless now waste half my evening urging you to let her alone, get your absurd marriage annulled, and leave her to enchant some other misguided creature. But as I feel sure that you are determined to rush on to your doom, I will say just the one thing you want to hear——"

"Yes," said Lord Lassington eagerly, as she paused.

"She will be either in touch with Mr. Francis, who recommended her to me; or she will be at her old school. Somewhere near Canterbury I think it was. But old Francis will know; for outside these two sets of people she knows no one, I believe."

Lord Lassington leapt to his feet.

"You are the very kindest woman in the world," he cried quickly, "and I can't thank you enough—I must find her."

In her turn the Duchess rose.

"I know that," said she, with plain scorn in her tone.

"I suppose you hate Matilda Hope," he suggested wistfully.

The Duchess meditated for a moment, regarding him with an expression which baffled him to read; finally she patted him on the arm, for the third time, much as she might have patted her smallest son in giving him some toy his heart was set upon.

"No," she replied slowly: and as if the verdict she was about to record even surprised her as she uttered it. "No, curiously enough I can see how attractive the child is; and now, of course, that one knows who she is, one can trace many resemblances to old Antoine himself in her. Besides the thing was not entirely her fault—not entirely. But with Victoria I am extremely angry, Doodles: for I consider that she treated us all abominably—your Matilda too—abominably. We might really have been nothing more than a set of wooden ninepins."

And having delivered herself of this considered opinion, Her Grace wound up by remarking that she had now decided, metaphorically speaking, to wash her hands of the whole matter forever; for she was sick and tired of the vagaries of the new generation that was growing up, considering them far less talented, far less agreeable, and much worse mannered than the contemporaries of her own youth.

"Yes," she ended, "that's what Victoria did, treated us like a set of ninepins."

But the expression although used bitterly enough by the Duchess tickled Lord Lassington's sense of humour and he threw back his head and laughed heartily.

"I like your idea of ninepins," he said: "there is a certain neatness about it."

And then without the slightest warning of what he was about to do, and giving tongue to a particularly loud "view-halloo," he caught the astounded Duchess by both her hands and swung with the utmost vigour the bewildered peeress round and round several times; bringing the ex-

traordinary ceremony to an even more remarkable close by kissing her with great heartiness on either cheek in the Gallic manner.

"There are just two women I adore—yes, fairly dote on—in this world," he cried exultantly. "And one is Victoria, for giving me the mitten; and the other is Victoria's mama, for her excellent sense."

And then with a headlong dash at the door, which he banged loudly behind him, he was gone; leaving an extremely breathless and discomposed Duchess behind, who, sinking into the nearest chair, endeavoured to set about regaining her wonted poise and calm before she left the room.

"Well," panted Her Grace, "we live in strange times: and as far as I can make out insanity in the rising generation must be rapidly on the increase. For nothing else can account for the way in which all these young people are behaving."

And with a final dubious shake of the head she sailed upstairs again there to ascertain from the sympathetic Mrs. Kincaid (to whom she related the recently passed extraordinary episode) if her toilette had suffered any great injury from the unexpected acrobatic feat through which she had been put so suddenly by the impetuous Marquis; now, she supposed, once more on the track of the runaway Matilda.

That her conjecture, as to Matilda's present whereabouts, most shrewdly hit the mark Mr. Francis could abundantly have testified. For at that very instant he was face to face with one of the most intricate and delicate problems of his whole legal career.

Only an hour previously had he reached, after a hard day's work, his rooms in Lincoln's Inn, more than usually ready for a peaceful evening of uninterrupted repose with a pipe and the latest work of Mr. Charles Dickens for mental refreshment and relaxation, when the outer doorbell of his snug apartments had been rung most insistently, and

after that inestimable treasure amongst elderly widows, his much valued housekeeper, Mrs. Batt, had answered the summons, she had returned to his comfortable, book-lined study ushering in no less unexpected a visitor—than Matilda.

"Miss Horsey, sir," she announced, "and she says it is very urgent."

Mr. Francis, experiencing a fleeting sensation of regret, laid aside his novel and rose to his feet.

"My dear, what is the matter?" he cried a second later, for the strange immobility of her white face alarmed him. "I hope nothing is very seriously wrong with you."

Just in the shadow beyond the cheerful lamplight she stood, her look bent obstinately on the ground so that her long lashes hid from him what her eyes might have told him: and through his glasses Mr. Francis peered at her anxiously.

"I am married," announced Matilda slowly.

"Married?"

Mr. Francis found the information a pill indeed; exceedingly difficult to swallow.

"Married! oh, surely not."

"Yes, I am," repeated Matilda, coming a few steps nearer the perturbed lawyer whose mind was now running aghast on every kind of dire possibility.

"At least I'm not certain if it's legal or not."

"You are not certain," repeated the lawyer in a horrified voice.

"No," returned Matilda.

"Good gad," cried Mr. Francis, and with that he remained staring alternately out of the open window into the summer night and at Matilda, in the utmost doubt and perplexity.

Matilda made an uncertain movement towards him.

"Not certain—what I am—really—," she faltered out: and by this time completely worn out with the day's trying

adventures, and her long and wearisome walk from the south of London to that legal district in which Mr. Francis resided, the next moment she had collapsed in a dead faint on the floor at his feet.

Mr. Francis instantly became a man of action.

With great swiftness he knelt by Matilda, gathered her up on his arm, and called loudly for Mrs. Batt.

Who almost immediately came hurrying back, all kindly anxiety when she saw what had happened. And thereafter with her able and motherly assistance he busied himself in caring for the worn-out girl.

Above her unconscious figure the eyes of the two elderly people met.

"She's had some kind of a shock, sir," said Mrs. Batt: an opinion in which Mr. Francis concurred.

Deciding that Matilda must remain in absolute quiet for the next few hours Mr. Francis himself carried her into his small, rarely used guest room, dispatching Mrs. Batt at the same time for various restoratives.

And at last under their joint ministrations Matilda with a sigh and a shiver opened her eyes.

"Now, you are not to say one word," admonished Mr. Francis as he wrapped her most carefully in his own much-valued travelling plaid: an order which Matilda was only too content to obey, feeling as she did.

"Tomorrow," continued Mr. Francis cheerfully, "we'll talk things over."

It was at this moment that his front door bell again rang with extreme violence: peal upon peal.

"Now, what can that be?" asked Mr. Francis irritably; raising himself from the stooping position in which he had been tucking up Matilda.

"Mrs. Batt—unless it's of vital importance, I'm at home to nobody—you understand."

With a comprehending nod Mrs. Batt hurried from the room, shutting the door noiselessly behind her.

Matilda shivered and opened her eyes again.

"Don't let him take me away," she begged in a tone of deep entreaty. "It has all been a dreadful mistake. Tell him he's quite free—and I'm very sorry——"

Her voice trailed off into broken sentences of utter fatigue.

"I never want—to see—him again."

Brokenly the words came; and turning her face away, except for a low sob which escaped her once or twice, Matilda lay motionless.

"There, there," soothed Mr. Francis as gently as any woman, laying his hand on hers. "No one shall upset you, Pussy; I promise you that. Try to go to sleep, dear child, for you look quite worn out."

And in his turn he tiptoed out of the room.

In the passage he was met by an incoherent Mrs. Batt who, struggling with her rising consternation at the untowardly dramatic events thus agitating the even tenour of their wonted household ways, imparted to him the strange and disturbing news that his second visitor was no less a personage than the Marquis of Lassington: who, it transpired, also desired to speak with him on business of the most momentous character.

"The Marquis of Lassington? Impossible," repeated Mr. Francis in mounting perplexity. "But he was married today to Lady Victoria English; and he ought to be safely on his honeymoon by now."

But that he was most certainly far from being on his honeymoon but was at that precise moment undoubtedly standing, in a state of mental disorder, on Mr. Francis's hearthrug behind the closed door of his library Mrs. Batt was prepared to swear to in any court of law in the land. A fact which she proceeded most earnestly to assure Mr. Francis.

"And looking, if I may say so, sir, as if the poor young gentleman had been pulled through a bush backwards—and it a holly bush," she concluded firmly.

Mr. Francis scratched his head.

"This," he said wanly, "is evidently to be a night of surprises: very singular."

And shaking his head he readjusted his glasses, sent Mrs. Batt back to watch over the fugitive Matilda, and, after squaring his shoulders as though about to spar with some phantom opponent, he walked slowly down the short passage deep in troubled thought.

Once fairly inside his usually peaceful retreat he found himself confronted by a most voluble and distracted bridegroom (as he supposed) whose one aim seemed to be to find, of all people, Miss Matilda Horsey. She being—as far as Mr. Francis was aware—a complete stranger to him.

Mr. Francis stood aghast at such a demand on such a day.

"But what possible interest can you have in Miss Horsey?" he asked. "And if I may suggest it for your consideration, my lord, what will your wife think of it all?"

Lord Lassington groaned.

"She is my wife," he said irritably.

At this extraordinary assertion Mr. Francis literally gazed upon him open-mouthed: for the moment imagining that his new visitor must be slightly demented, at least.

"Who is your wife?" he asked in the accents of a sleep-walker.

"Matilda Hope," shouted Lord Lassington uncompromisingly.

And plunged forthwith into a rapid and confused explanation of the events of the last three months, as well as those of that very day, from which finally Mr. Francis gathered that Matilda had taken the place of Lady Victoria for that day's ceremony, and, as her husband expressed it, 'blown everybody up sky-high.'

With dark looks of deep disapproval Mr. Francis heard the tale to its conclusion.

"Dear, dear," he commented testily, "was there no one with a grain of sense about? The whole thing was most irregular."

Admitting the justice of the remark Lord Lassington yet

ventured to explain that the smash-up having occurred the only thing to do now was to pick up the pieces and mend them as deftly as possible.

"Tut, tut," said Mr. Francis, "I don't like it."

And frowningly he sat down and cogitated the matter, whilst Lord Lassington took a turn up and down the carpet.

"Well?" he asked, at length.

"Very impulsive and very impractical," returned Mr. Francis absently.

"Oh, yes, yes," said the bridegroom, "I know that—but is she—do you know where she is?"

Mr. Francis, his mind fairly bristling with complicated and legal points, did not reply at once to the question.

"Is she by any lucky chance here?" demanded his visitor anxiously.

"I think I may admit that," reflected the lawyer, his habitual air of reserve and caution enwrapping him once more, at the same moment that Lord Lassington in his tigerlike and agitated roamings up and down the room caught sight of Matilda's little empty reticule, which had dropped unnoticed on the floor.

Swiftly he pounced on this direct piece of evidence, crying, "She's here, thank God."

Mr. Francis also had been rendering thanks for the same blessing: although less openly. But he was a little put out at Lord Lassington coming on this piece of knowledge at the very outset of what must be a very ticklish conversation. He would have preferred to have endowed him with the information at his own time and in his own way. So might he have kept a distinct advantage in his own hands.

"Now," said Lord Lassington facing the pensive man of law squarely, "I must see her, you know."

But this request, almost a command from its tone, Mr. Francis was not going to grant in any hurry.

"For she is in a very distressed frame of mind," he explained. "And certainly stands in sad need of some considerable amount of repose, my lord."

"She shall have all the repose in the world," returned her husband generously. "But let me see her."

"But she is asleep," objected Mr. Francis: stating what he rather hoped to be the case than what he actually knew to be a certainty.

"Good Heavens, man, am I an ogre that I can't look at my own wife? Besides I've been up and down this beastly city hunting for her for hours, it seems to me. And after all I was only married this morning."

The case thus put clearly having entailed considerable hardship on an innocent man, for Mr. Francis felt himself in justice bound to admit that the tangle was none of Lord Lassington's making, he decided that in common fairness it was his duty to smooth matters as far as lay in his power: although he had but the smallest hopes of Matilda's looking at the situation from a sensible point of view. He therefore, while pointing out that if he gave in so far as to permit a peep at the runaway Lord Lassington must practice sufficient restraint not to upset Matilda in any way, decided to risk granting the request made to him.

"But you won't wake her—if she is asleep," he pleaded.

"I'll be as mum as a mouse: but do your best for me, there's a kind soul. For I don't mind confessing to you that Matilda Hope means the world to me."

Mr. Francis smiled at the eager young man.

"Mind—mum as a mouse," he warned: and on this understanding left the room to find out exactly what Matilda's attitude might be should she still be unfortunately awake.

But Mrs. Batt at the door of her room met him to his great relief with a finger on her lip.

"The child is sound asleep," she said. "It would be a shame to wake her. I gave her a soothing draught in her hot milk just now; and she went off like the lamb she is."

So Mrs. Batt, too, had fallen a victim to Matilda's charm!

And Mr. Francis returning with the news could only counsel cool patience to a very much worked-up and disappointed swain. Schooling himself to an impassivity that

was merely on the surface Lord Lassington listened to the lawyer's wise suggestions in silence.

"But you promised me one peep at her," he said at last, when Mr. Francis ended his well-turned harangue.

"So I did," said Mr. Francis, and led him into the spare room where Mrs. Batt sat sentinel over Matilda's slumbers, at work at a little round table close by the bed.

As lightly as Mr. Francis himself Lord Lassington came to the foot of the old-fashioned four-poster, and leaning on its high wooden carved foot-board in silence contemplated Matilda.

There in the shadow of the red merino curtains she lay: her eyelashes still wet with the tears she had shed, her flushed cheek pillowed on her right hand: the other, with its brand-new wedding ring adorning it, lay on the shawl which covered her.

"She's nothing but a baby," said Mr. Francis softly, "after all."

"Nothing but a baby," assented Lord Lassington absently, adding in a low tone more as if he were speaking to himself than to anyone present. "I loved her, I believe, from the first moment I saw her—but oh, how she can enrage me!"

And then before Mr. Francis had any inkling of his intention, he moved quickly round to the side of the bed opposite that on which Mrs. Batt sat sewing so industriously and bending over Matilda had dropped the lightest of kisses on the little hand that lay so listlessly in the folds of the plaid.

Matilda stirred and sighed in her sleep: and Mrs. Batt threw a warning look at the offender and an anxious one at Matilda. For a few seconds all three people remained watching her. Then, with a last glance at her, her husband turned and strode quickly out of the room, followed by Mr. Francis.

Once back in the library Lord Lassington threw himself dejectedly enough into a chair.

"And what am I to do now?" he asked.

Mr. Francis came to a sedate anchor in a chair opposite him.

"I should advise," he returned slowly, "your going home, my lord. I am afraid there is nothing to be done here tonight. Tomorrow will be a new day and often the night brings counsel."

CHAPTER XIX

NARRATES HOW MATILDA LISTENED TO A MOVING
TALE: AND HOW THEREAFTER SHE MADE A
CHOICE BETWEEN TWO WAYS OF LIVING

BUT alas, the night did not bring any counsel to Matilda which made her iron resolution not to see or have anything more to do with Lord Lassington a less determined one.

Certainly, refreshed by a sound sleep and fortified by a most excellent breakfast, she appeared the next morning to have regained to a very large extent her usual cheerful serenity of manner.

But, although she listened with exemplary patience to all that Mr. Francis had to say on the burning subject of her marriage and her husband, she still stuck to her point.

"For my mind is at last quite made up," she informed the worried luminary of the law: and smiled enchantingly on him from behind her teacup. "I quite admit all you say to be true. My conduct was far, very far from what anyone might have anticipated. And as you say the Misses Nixon would have been extremely disappointed in my falling away from what should be expected of a young lady of education and breeding. I see I should never have given in to Lady Sarah—I should have come at once to you."

Mr. Francis nodded, at the same time drily pointing out that this late perception on Matilda's part was rather like locking the stable door after the race horse had been removed. To perceive the right course so late in the day was really not of very much practical use to anyone.

To this Matilda also assented with sweet reasonableness.

"But," she continued, "it all seemed so like Fate at the time. And I let myself be persuaded. The fact is I was afraid—yes, I was a coward."

This was such a new idea to Mr. Francis that he could not help inquiring soberly in what way she considered herself to have shown pusillanimity.

Matilda embarked on an explanation with cheerful alacrity.

"You see I was afraid I should have to go back to the Misses Nixon—and remain there for the rest of my life."

A dismal prospect indeed: and one Mr. Francis could well understand her shirking.

"And I did not feel myself equal to it, at all. You see I have been away from the Misses Nixon for over three months. That is what made me a coward, I expect, when Lady Sarah held that pistol to my head. I knew if she went to the Duchess I should have to leave Tilney House at once. And I had been so happy there; for it was another kind of life which I liked much better," she ended frankly.

Mr. Francis remained silent: for these remarks of Matilda's conveyed to him a whole volume of resolution in their manner of delivery. And with a sense of amusement he came to the conclusion that Matilda had grown most decidedly out of the pliant child of three months before and developed into a very gently determined young lady; who was quite capable of, and bent on, doing her own thinking.

Finding that Mr. Francis did not seem to have anything to say Matilda continued her observations.

"And also, it is not as if I were quite married," she continued reflectively, reverting to another point of the much discussed subject. "That tall Bishop said something about the registers having to be cancelled: and it was no earthly use our signing. Only Lord Lassington, who is, I have found out, very obstinate, would not take any notice of him

then. But I was to have been married again at Dover today, you know. However that won't happen now."

Matilda's air of quiet satisfaction drew from Mr. Francis a disturbed clucking which halted her flow of words temporarily. A pause which the lawyer used to embark once more on a further expostulatory remonstrance on the general shortsightedness of her views and intentions.

"Besides your new state imposes a new set of duties on you," he ended.

But little impression, alas, did this make on Matilda: who with a shake of her head resumed her interrupted explanations.

"He said," she went on with aggravating firmness, "Lord Lassington, I mean, that he did not care for me—that he would never forgive me—and never forget what I had done. I told him I had done it all for the best. I was most particular to explain all about Lady Victoria; but it didn't make a bit of difference. So you see nothing can be gained by our meeting."

Uneasily Mr. Francis surveyed this new Matilda, who with every fresh sentence she uttered revealed to him such baffling aspects of what he had imagined to be a gentle feminine character.

Indeed he hardly knew how best to combat these very set opinions of hers.

"People don't always mean what they say," he suggested at last, a little feebly.

Matilda smiled at him adorably, once more shook her curls at him, and busied herself in pouring him out a second cup of tea.

"Oh, yes they do, at the time," she replied, "it's been in their mind for ages probably—or it wouldn't come out. For it wouldn't be there to say."

There seemed so much sound and incontestable philosophy about this that Mr. Francis found himself obliged to fall back on another line of defence.

"You must allow for his wounded pride, my dear."

"Why so I do."

Matilda was openly surprised that he should make this point.

"And that is why," she returned as she handed him his cup of tea, "I know we could never be happy, now."

On hearing this Mr. Francis' whole being became saturated with a deep distress, for Matilda had spoken with a distant aloofness that he began to see no hope of softening: and if she persisted in her present determination he saw much heavy weather ahead.

"He'd always have a grievance and be brooding over it," she continued helping herself to another slice of toast, "and I don't think I could bear to remain with a husband who always had something ready-made to lecture me about—whenever he felt annoyed."

And from this position he could not budge her.

"Of course I regret it all," she admitted. "But there it is."

After this Mr. Francis felt that there was nothing for him to do but to give the contest up, as a task beyond his powers, at any rate for the time being. He felt he must leave Lord Lassington to do his own fighting. Probably he would be able to persuade Matilda where others might be powerless. The personal equation, after all, was not to be overlooked or underestimated.

"You can't love him, child, that's quite clear," he said decidedly.

Matilda wrinkled her forehead.

"That's what he said, too," she admitted, "so there's two of you think the same—and perhaps I don't."

But even this obliging readiness to agree with him did not placate Mr. Francis; and he remained frowning and pondering over the, to him, utterly curious situation in a displeased silence, whilst Matilda finished her final cup of tea and her last piece of thickly buttered toast with open relish, and the hands of the clock jerked themselves round to a quarter to ten. Then Mr. Francis found his voice and spoke again: but this time on an entirely different topic.

"I must," he said meditatively, "get into touch as soon as possible with your godfather, Pussy. As your guardian it is his right to know in what a singular position you stand today."

With an expression of faint alarm plainly becoming visible Matilda raised her eyes from her plate and looked at him.

"Oh," she cried, "suppose he says I am to go back to the Misses Nixon?"

Mr. Francis pushed back his chair, picked up the *Times* which, neatly folded, lay by his place on the table, and rose to his feet; meeting Matilda's doubtful glance reassuringly.

"Don't worry yourself on that score," he returned. "Lord Lassington would never permit it."

In her turn Matilda rose to her feet, and they were just about to leave the room—Mr. Francis had even already opened the door—when the sound of voices along the passage sent her flying back into the remotest corner of the breakfast room with a face on which nothing but the deepest dismay showed itself.

"It's him, it's him, I know it's him," she gasped. "I won't see him, I won't listen to him. Please don't make me."

Panic, it appeared, had seized the luckless Matilda for its own.

For, shutting her eyes most tightly, she put her fingers in her ears and retreated into the deepest recesses of the corner she had flown to with the greatest expedition.

Suppressing a violent desire to laugh—although he recognized a characteristic touch in her childish behaviour—with a monitory word of caution Mr. Francis escaped from the room; closing the door gently behind him as he did so.

In the study, to which his steps had been directed by the careful Mrs. Batt, he found not only, to his wonderment, his expected caller awaiting him but a second visitor whom he had not dreamt of seeing.

Gravely he greeted both Lord Lassington and the Duc de Lorgny and begged them to be seated.

"And I was," he added, "just about to communicate with Your Grace—about this unfortunate state of affairs. Which I suppose you are barely acquainted with."

The Duc stroked his beard reflectively.

"I was there," he said drily. "And I thought it best after the ceremony to publicly own the new Marchioness of Lassington as my granddaughter."

"The deuce you did!" cried Mr. Francis, for once entirely startled out of his wonted correctitude of demeanour.

Matilda's grandfather laughed.

"I suppose you think I made a mistake there, eh, Francis?"

Mr. Francis took refuge in his snuff box.

"It's odd—but she's never mentioned that," he said slowly.

Lord Lassington, who had withdrawn to a modest seat, half hidden by the curtains, in the bay window which overlooked Lincoln's Inn Gardens, now spoke.

"I tell you she doesn't believe it: nothing I could say would make her. She looked on it as a huge joke."

This attitude of Matilda's was not so amazing to Mr. Francis as they expected: for had he not just come from an interview with her in which her curiously obstinate misunderstanding of the whole situation had caused him the liveliest apprehension?

Thoughtfully he tapped his snuff box against his right hand as he stood there regarding his anxious and distinguished clients.

"She is in a very extraordinary state of mind, Monseigneur," he began. "A series of shocks, such as she has unfortunately experienced, seem to have left her with no sense of proportion, shall I say; and very little wish to build up on the wreckage of what she had hoped might become a fair edifice."

"Yes," returned the Duc. "I can quite understand in what a state of mind the child must find herself. But last night she was tired out: and this morning—if she has had a good night's rest—she may be better able to cope with the

situation. In any case I am afraid we must subject her to the strain of an interview—after all something must be settled.”

Admitting the justice of this contention Mr. Francis returned his snuff box to his pocket and blew his nose thoughtfully.

“Naturally it is your unquestioned right to see Matilda,” he acknowledged. “But if I may venture to say so, pray be as gentle with her as you can. The child is suffering, I am certain; although probably nothing would induce her to own it.”

For to this conclusion had Mr. Francis’ reflections led him at last.

From the open window the voice of Lord Lassington sounded once again.

“She needn’t suffer a moment more than she likes,” he said stoutly. “And I have a lot to say to her, too.”

“I daresay,” returned Mr. Francis. “But the question is—will she listen?”

This being undoubtedly an extremely doubtful point Lord Lassington looked down his nose and his whole aspect darkened perceptibly.

“And she’s so obstinate,” he muttered under his breath.

Meanwhile the Duc was inclined to take a more cheerful view.

“I will treat her as the most fragile china, Francis,” he promised, and then he smiled a trifle amusedly for they both seemed to him unduly nervous. At his age he felt sure he could persuade so young and docile a creature as his new-found granddaughter to walk along the path set for her by her elders.

“After all,” he continued, “she struck me as possessing much good sense; and as quite ready to listen to anything one wished to say.”

“Humph,” said Lord Lassington.

“She can be a very good listener,” admitted Mr. Francis.

The old Duc looked from one uncertain face to the other.

"I suppose you mean to convey that she takes after her mother, Francis," he said with a quizzical look.

Mr. Francis nodded.

"As I remember her—" he began.

But Lord Lassington thrust in a rapid conversational bar.

"Did you ever get your own way with her?" he demanded.

The Duc pondered this question; obviously searching his memory with extreme care.

A couple of minutes passed.

"As I think of it now," said the Duc slowly, "it seems to me that I scarcely ever got her to do what I wanted. And if Antoinette ever did give in it was on points that were quite unimportant—extremely trivial."

Lord Lassington shrugged his shoulders.

"There, you see," he said.

And with these ominous admissions ringing in his ears Mr. Francis went forth in search of Matilda.

He found her still in the same spot wherein he had left her fifteen minutes before: a frozen statue of apprehension, with her fingers in her ears and her eyes shut.

"Matilda," he called sharply from the door, "don't be ridiculous. You can't make me believe you've remained in that position ever since I left you."

His raised tones penetrating to her hearing as he had hoped they would, Matilda opened her eyes, and removed the obstructions to an understanding of what he wished to convey to her.

"No," she returned, with an irrepressible laugh, "but I thought I heard him."

"Who?" demanded Mr. Francis.

This question caused Matilda to assume an air of marked reproach.

"You know who—perfectly well," she countered. "And my mind is quite made up. I won't see him, or listen to him."

Mr. Francis regarded her steadily.

"Dear me," he observed coldly, "how depressingly obstinate young women can be."

Matilda, quite undisturbed at the implied censure, laughed again.

"I know it, and sometimes it's a very good thing for us, too," she retorted.

To this of course Mr. Francis dissented quite heatedly: but, announcing that he had not come to argue with her: in his most judicial and set-me-down manner, went on to say that if Matilda would be so obliging as to come with him into his library he there wished to make known to her—her guardian.

Matilda's astonishment was undisguised.

"My guardian, did you say?" she asked in an uncomplimentarily incredulous voice. "How ever did he get here?"

Mr. Francis took no notice of the question; but repeating the information which had so astonished her begged her to attend him at once. At the same time he wondered what effect these tidings might have on her.

But Matilda was becoming inured to shock it appeared, and all she did was to run gaily up to him and slip her arm into his with a laugh that was almost elfin in its mischief.

"But, how fortunate!" she cried. "Now we can get something settled."

Much Mr. Francis hoped so although in his heart much he doubted it; but at least he assured himself that it was a good beginning when she walked down the passage by his side with an air of the utmost amiability.

On the threshold of the library he stood back and let her pass into the room before him.

However, whatever, or whoever, Matilda had prepared herself to meet she most certainly did not expect to see the alleged guardian who stood facing her by the fireplace—composedly awaiting her coming.

"But that is the Duc, de Lorgny," she cried, openly daunted.

"And your guardian," returned Mr. Francis succinctly.

"Oh," murmured Matilda: and swept him a deep curtsey. The Duc came forward a pace or two, and taking Matilda by the hand led her unresistingly to a chair; in which at his easily authoritative gesture of invitation she seated herself in a demure silence.

Mr. Francis noticed that either by accident or design it stood presenting a square back to the window wherein he knew Lord Lassington to be still ensconced: although for the moment that dashing peer was not visible.

"*Mon enfant,*" began the Duc abruptly, "I have a tale to tell you; and at the end of it you may detest me. But, *enfin*, it must be told."

And, standing there before her and looking down at her inscrutable little face, he commenced, without any further preamble, his recital.

"You must bear with me," he said thoughtfully, "if I take you back to those days when we were much closer to that fatal revolution, which devastated my country, at the close of the last century. For me it will always be a much nearer thing than it can be for your generation. And that I was born in 1792, sixty-three years ago, when most of my order were either in exile or were daily mounting the steps of the guillotine must be recorded as a reason why I grew up to detest with all my young heart those Frenchmen who were not of our own rank: God knows we had suffered enough at the hands of those others. And every noble was not bad and heartless as they made him out to be."

He stopped for a moment looking beyond Matilda with sombre eyes back into that dreadful past he was calling up.

"As Mr. Francis is aware," he continued, "I was fortunate enough to have had an English mother—Charlotte Matilda Horsey—who at her death left me beyond want of any kind."

By the time the Duc had reached this point in his narrative Matilda was according him an attention so profound that she had become totally unaware of the presence of any other listeners in the quiet room: and Mr. Francis'

almost stealthy removal of himself to a seat in the window behind her passed quite unremarked by her.

"My father from his privations," the Duc resumed, "had always been more or less of an invalid—smuggled out of Paris as he was in a hay cart and forced to journey to the coast under the most deplorable and even terrible of conditions—with half his relatives massacred—and he had from a tiny child imbued me with all that hate he felt himself, understandably, for that *canaille* which had destroyed his King and Queen, murdered half his family and most of his friends: made of his beautiful Paris, which he loved to the last day of his life, nothing but a shambles; robbed him of all his estates, and cast him, a derelict in fortune as well as health, to subsist upon an alien shore as best he might."

Raptly Matilda hung upon his words: even her breathing was so light that she had all the appearance of a figure that was entirely spellbound.

"For many months after his arrival in England my poor father starved—teaching his own language to gain a bare livelihood. I have often heard him say that perhaps what he felt the most in those days was that life had become so utterly ugly. Then at the house of some mutual friends he met the lady who afterwards became his wife. She was something older than he was in years—but younger, far younger, in sorrowful experience. And so they were married," said the Duc in his thoughtful manner as of one who still pictured the scenes he described, "at a little church in a sleepy country village—my mother has told me of her wedding a hundred times. And I can remember more than a dozen happy years in our Sussex home."

He smiled involuntarily as at some pleasant memory.

"The English countryside has always had for me a peculiar charm, especially in the springtime when the woods are alive with primroses, the spring is so essentially a time of beauty and hope."

"I love the blue-bells," murmured Matilda, hardly aware he had uttered her thoughts aloud.

"When I was fifteen years old my father died—a chill, neglected, bereaved us of him before we hardly were aware that he was suffering more than he had always been. And my mother followed him to the grave within six months—literally dying of a broken heart. That can happen, you now."

Matilda's eyes filled with tears.

"But you must not trouble your little head over such far-off sorrows," said her grandfather gently. "By the time that I was sixteen, and a lanky youth as full of dreams and prejudices as any reformer of them all, my poor country was fortunately less troubled. Perhaps you can understand how tristfully, being a Frenchman, my eyes were always turning to that little stretch of silver sea and beyond it to that country, my own, which I had never entered. But it was not till I had reached my twentieth year that the power of Napoleon Bonaparte was crushed at Waterloo."

Again he fell silent as though he had naturally come to the end of a period.

"By this time it was necessary to look about me and find out what I might reclaim of what had once been our own. I was, as you can understand, *mon enfant*," he went on, "related to many prominent families both in this country and in France; and amongst others to the Westmainham house through my mother. So that pulling one string with another, in the days of Louis Philippe, I returned to France to live. And being, I suppose, extremely fortunate, I found that it was possible to repurchase two of the smaller of our own estates."

He said this so whimsically that Matilda found herself laughing, a little to her own surprise.

"In spite of troublous, political times, I managed to steer my course that kept me out of the limelight. And when I was nearing my thirties—I married."

Again Matilda, with her eyes fixed earnestly on him, was conscious of an atmosphere of increasing tragedy about her grandfather: and quite unconsciously stretched out her hand which the Duc took and, for the remainder of his recital, held clasped firmly in his own.

"Alas, my *Espérance* remained with me but long enough to put our daughter into my arms—the little Antoinette—and then she died."

With that quick sympathy which was always so much a part of her character, Matilda laid impulsively her soft cheek for a second on the hand which held hers as the old man continued softly:

"For seventeen years my child was the light of my life."

He smiled benignantly on Matilda.

"Thou art her image," he said, dropping into the more familiar and tender idiom quite unconsciously.

"And then on her seventeenth birthday she made, quite unknown to me, the acquaintance of a certain—person——"

He fell silent abruptly as though even at this lapse of time he could not bring himself to utter the detested name.

"A person—a singer of opera bouffe—a son of some provincial—fired with a desire to tread the boards. Oh, good looking, doubt it not, and a man of dangerous fascination to a young girl. He was to teach her singing—I may have seen him on the stage more than once: but I assure you he meant nothing at all to me. Ah *ça*, even now the whole affair cuts too deep. For Antoinette lost her heart to him, the ruffian; and for the first time in her life my little girl had a secret that she did not share with me."

Deeply he sighed; obviously living painfully in retrospect over again those long past days of deep distress.

"That year—fatal as it was to be to us both—was the coronation year of Her Majesty; and my distant kinsman, the late Duke of Westmainham, having recently married a young bride, was anxious I should make her acquaintance: for we had always been good friends, he and I. So I decided to come over to England for some weeks; but, alas, was

persuaded by Antoinette to leave her in Paris. She was always an inveterate little Parisienne."

The deepening shadow falling round him drew from Matilda the tribute of a heart-felt sigh; although at the moment, fascinated as she was by the thrilling and to her romantic history, she barely realized he was speaking of her own mother.

Echoing her sigh the Duc took up his tale again, anxious to bring it to a conclusion, repressing all other signs of feeling.

"And so I left the child—I recollect that day vividly yet; it was a dull and rainy morning. And Antoinette was wearing a blue dress; one that I always liked to see her in, it suited her so well. Little did I imagine—ah, well, it is all very long ago now. But I never saw her again," he ended harshly.

"You mean—she ran away?" demanded Matilda.

"Eloped with that *vaurien*—the day of my return three months later—with that singer of ballads. A curse on his good-looking face! Leaving the usual note behind her. And it broke my heart and my pride in the same hour."

And to her great distress Matilda saw the old eyes fill with tears that would not be denied even at the recollection of that long passed away moment of blighting wretchedness. Quickly she jumped from her chair and gently forcing him into it perched herself on the arm, light as a thistledown, and laid her bright curls against his white head.

"Don't tell me any more," she begged. "It is too sad for you."

But with his arm round her he went on.

"Thou art her child—and I have done thee great wrong, little one. Perhaps I knew it first when I met thee in the Park that other morning. Never before had I allowed myself to envisage from what I had separated thee, of gracious and charming. But let me atone. She died when thou wert so small a thing that thou canst scarcely remember her, I suppose."

Matilda searched her memory for a moment: and suddenly there came to her the vision of that young girl's face she had looked into so many years before.

"Oh, yes, I can," she cried. "That was my mother then: she had dark curls that brushed my cheek when she kissed me; and she was always laughing."

"Then after her death—thy father and I met."

Matilda sprang to her feet and fell back a pace or two.

"But I remember you, too—you said, yes it was you—'The child does not please me.' Oh, grandpapa, that was not kind."

Her grandfather shook his head.

"*Mea culpa*," he replied. "But you must remember that I had lost my ewe lamb forever."

"And my father?" questioned Matilda thoughtfully.

"He too died—not so very long after your mother. He was, they said, always her lover. The women of our house have always known how to hold their men when they wished."

The tone of half satiric pride with which he spoke was lost on Matilda, whose thoughts had flown to her first years at the Swallow's Nest.

"And then you sent me to England?"

The Duc nodded.

"Mr. Francis chose your school and took you there himself at my expressed desire. All I wanted then was to forget that I had ever had a daughter. The very sight of you, and this perhaps you will never understand, was exquisitely painful to me. Therefore I never intended you to come into my life—to plague me. *Voilà*: that is the truth."

Matilda devoted a short space to intensive consideration of the situation and her grandfather's pronouncement.

"But here I am," she said, "here I am, plaguing you after all."

The Duc laughed.

"*L'homme propose et femme dispose*," he returned, pinch-

ing her cheeks. "But the question is, can you forgive me, *mon enfant*; and allow me to do my best to make up for those long years of neglect?"

He regarded Matilda anxiously; and Mr. Francis became all strained attention to know what line Matilda would decide to take. True she had listened with every appearance of a sympathy that was both appreciative and tolerant: but from many years' experience the lawyer knew that an attentive ear does not always indicate an open mind, or a considered judgment. And when all was said Matilda was an impulsive, and at times curiously emotional little person whose good sense was not always to be reckoned on. Also she had a remarkable way of reasoning herself into the strangest conclusions at times; as witness her behaviour of the last few historic days.

Still the child had an excellent heart.

Mr. Francis, coming to this conclusion, braced himself to hear with fortitude what she might say.

"Can you forgive me, little one?" asked the Duc patiently no more.

Matilda moved a quick step or two towards him.

"Yes," she replied gravely as she took her old seat on the chair arm. "Yes—grandpapa."

The hesitation was just marked enough for the old man to catch how subtly she was conveying her acceptance of him at last; and his embrace was warm and his voice earnest as he assured her with the utmost eloquence at his command of his determination to make her happy and to see that she had all that a young girl could demand of life, as far as it lay in his power to accomplish this task.

"So far, so good," murmured the attentive Lord Lassing into Mr. Francis' absent ear; and skipped forth from that safe harbourage of the tranquil bow window into the disturbed arena of party politics, before that cautious man had any chance to restrain the foolhardy steps of the adventurous warrior.

"You have, I think," he mellifluously suggested, "forgotten me."

The sound of his voice, insinuating and smooth, caused Matilda to leap to her feet with a velocity that almost over-set the chair and her grandfather; with crimson cheeks and blazing eyes she faced the intruder.

"How did he get here?" she demanded, pointing a stern finger at the intrepid soul so ready to rush on his doom.

But before anybody could answer her question a new spirit of sheer panic invaded her and she backed into a corner; shutting her eyes, and stopping up her ears as now appeared to be her unvarying custom whenever marital questions were on the tapis.

Indignantly she was heard to declare:

"I said I wouldn't see him, or speak to him—and well he knows why."

"But, my child—," remonstrated the Duc gently.

"But—Matilda—," cried Mr. Francis in mounting dismay.

"But, hang it all," said the Marquis of Lassington, and his tone was blank enough.

Matilda withdrew her fingers from her ears: these being apparently no bar to her hearing but rather symbols of what her mental attitude had become.

"No 'buts,'" she cried in open defiance of all three men who regarded her so aghast, "you don't love me—and I don't love you."

Having said this as precipitately as she could manage to get the words out, she popped back into her self-imposed retirement once more.

Admonished by her uncompromising air that he had already made a false step, as much as by the warning looks of his godfather and Mr. Francis, Lord Lassington hesitated, openly discomfited, before he ventured on another move of any kind.

No longer, it was obvious, dared he lay the flattering

unction to his soul that his wife was either well disposed towards him, or inclined to give him a calm hearing.

"So she won't even listen to me," he said. "Was there ever such injustice?"

But justice, he went on to add bitterly, it was folly to expect from the female sex.

"No, I won't listen to you," returned Matilda stubbornly. "For you never say anything nice. And I am sick and tired of listening to sermons."

Unnoticed by the belligerents the Duc exchanged a look with Mr. Francis.

"Your behaviour," retorted Lord Lassington, gazing balefully now at Matilda, "encourages the art of sermonizing."

And then he sat himself down upon the edge of the writing table and issued what was to every ear in the room a clarion call of war—a real ultimatum.

"Pray ask of Lady Lassington, Mr. Francis," he said, "since she refuses to listen to me—who surely should have a courteous hearing at least—if she is going to behave as one expects a young lady to. Will she let bygones be bygones, will she clean the slate, and will she start afresh? Finally I should be indebted to you if you could ascertain from her if she has any intention of keeping her marriage vows? This may be a small point to her, but it has its interest for me."

Duly Mr. Francis, as well as he was able, complied with this request for information: and translated the same to Matilda; dwelling on the necessity for her careful consideration of these knotty points before she made any reply: and adding also, several, as he fancied, completely convincing arguments as to why in his opinion she must needs take the (as he expressed it) one and only sensible course.

But all this had no effect on Matilda: who seeming very doubtful as to the sense of, and quite certain as to the distaste she felt for, the curious programme outlined for her by Lord Lassington utterly refused to have anything to do with it. Letting bygones be bygones might be all very

well, she admitted: but cleaning slates just for the sake of cleaning them she had no heart for: added to which she did not believe that Lord Lassington could ever start afresh, or that he honestly meant to do so. To her mind he was eaten up with his own conceit. And as for her marriage vows—it was a very moot point whether she was his wife at all.

All this she made clear, exceeding clear, in no uncertain terms.

As for the advantages of her position, on which Mr. Francis had touched—it was very good of him to point them out to her so distinctly. But these she dismissed in a few short, well chosen sentences with an indifference so utter as to rouse in her grandfather the highest admiration for a spirit so lofty.

To Mr. Francis, however, Matilda appeared more in the light of a radical of the reddest dye: for not even the most advanced of these predatory thinkers could have turned up a more determined nose at the trappings and attributes of place, and power, and wealth.

There was only this difference, Mr. Francis considered, Matilda was utterly sincere—these advantages meant absolutely nothing to her.

“Well,” said Lord Lassington with cold resignation at last when Matilda ceased her fire: mainly because her stock of ammunition had run out, and all of a sudden her flood of inspiration had run dry. “Well, there: at any rate we know where we are now.”

And then abruptly he strode up to Matilda, who by this time had seated herself on a distant chair, and was regarding everyone with dark looks of mistrust.

“Matilda Hope,” he said in loud clear tones, “you’re nothing but a little curmudgeon—and if you want me back, which mark you, you will one of these days, my lady, you will have to ask me yourself.”

“I shall never do that,” said Matilda.

“And ask me very humbly, too,” he went on as though

she had not spoken. "For now I believe that I do detest you more than anyone else in the world: and it would take a lot to bring me to your feet again."

With that, most contradictorily, he caught her up fiercely, kissed her passionately, and cried with wicked exultation as he made a bolt for the door:

"That is something real for you to be angry about, my lady."

And was gone: leaving a dazed trio behind regarding each other slyly.

"Upon my word," remarked Matilda, breaking the silence at last, "there's a whirlwind for you."

But on the whole her tone, though markedly impersonal, was not displeased.

CHAPTER XX

CONTAINS SOMETHING OF EVERYTHING: AND SHOWS
MATILDA IN AN ENTIRELY NEW SET OF
CIRCUMSTANCES

AS Emerson tells us—dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to illusion.

Life being merely, therefore, as he goes on to say, a train of moods, something like a many-beaded string, it is not surprising to have to record that although there were times, undoubtedly, when Matilda suffered considerably; on the whole, across a gulf of two happy months spent in her grandfather's house, she could look back on the events of that fatal wedding day of hers with something approaching a humourous and calm comprehension, at all events.

That is not to say that she did not increasingly regret that she had ever allowed herself to be persuaded into the taking of what she now saw was a most inconsiderate step.

Still she did feel, and that also increasingly, that Lord Lassington had treated her with a laughing and contemptuous ridicule she could not bring herself to forgive.

More than once she had been on the point of writing to him a prim little note expressing her unfeigned distress if he had been really hurt by her impulsive doings; but every time she sat down to her desk and took up her pen the recollection of his last hateful and possessive action overcame her.

Reviewing them in retrospect his kisses, one might say,

roused in her a deep desire to get even with him: so angry did they make her.

Doubtless this was very wrong in Matilda: she was ready to admit as much at the same time as she felt it only truthful to urge that she could not help it.

However it was not often that she allowed herself to dwell upon these very dubious subjects: and petted and spoilt by all as she was in and about the great Parisian house her spirits were rapidly becoming normal.

A fact her vigilant grandfather noted with deep satisfaction.

Of her husband he had been careful to give Matilda no news although he was in constant communication with that doughty and impatient person.

But if, as he hoped secretly, things were to right themselves, he knew that not only did Matilda need that soothing balm applied to her young spirit which only time and absence can procure, but that she must inevitably be wooed over again and in something of a less lordly style by his godson. For that young man's sardonic humour and air of *laissez aller* had offended Matilda more than he had ever understood.

Not so easily did the mind of the never entirely understandable female, mused the old Duc, forgive or forget a lapse in manner or form where her affections were engaged. Indeed, in a long life, he had often observed the danger of taking anything for granted in the intricate affairs of Venus, or that dallying son of hers, Cupid. Women, old or young, undoubtedly distrusted sarcasm, whilst opening their hearts to the pretty flatteries of their lovers. After all, why not? Affectionate creatures all, they liked to receive the honey which was indubitably their right. Many a man's happiness or good fortune had been secured in proportion to his power of saying not only the right but the expected word at the critical moment.

Thus the old Duc reflected over a situation which was never very long absent from his thought as he sat under

the trees in his garden, with the *Revue des Deux Mondes* unheeded on his knees, one fine August morning waiting for Matilda to join him at their *petit déjeuner*.

With a smile, almost instantly followed by a light sigh, he pondered over the stubborn fact that the little puss already, and in so short a space of time—fast worker that she was, as Lord Lassington had pointed out on one memorable occasion—had learnt the trick of twisting him completely round her soft little finger whenever she had a mind to. And not only had he fallen a victim to her charms, but he knew very well that in every house of note in the Faubourg St. Germain, whose household contained a male of marriageable age (attached or unattached), this unhappy wight, be he dark or be he fair, was entirely at Matilda's mercy. So great already had her success been as a breaker of hearts. In this at least she was amply revenged for any despite she had suffered at the hands of her pseudo husband. Much the Duc hoped, in considering the matter, that her little air of unconsciousness was as natural as it looked. Although he most decidedly had his doubts. For since she had made the discovery, ably assisted by that maid of hers, Hortense—who was just as silly about the child as the rest of them—that she was pretty, yet another idea might possibly have dawned on her and an equally important one.

Did she or did she not know, the Duc wondered, that she possessed that most dangerous and evanescent of all qualities—charm?

As a matter of fact (and very much in your ear, gentle reader), she had recently made that delicious and astounding discovery. But she was hugging the delightful secret to herself. No intention had she of letting that remarkable Persian cat out of its bag.

Only—and this in the deepest privacy of her own rooms—did she wish she had been aware of the distracting gift, or talent—call it what you will—before her way and Lord Lassington's had parted forever.

Much she would have liked to try it—the teeniest bit—on him.

For consider, what (if he had been responsive to the treatment at all as these charming Frenchmen were) might he not have done, on thinking it over, to put him in his proper place: aye, and keep the pirate there, too.

For such young men of the temperament of her temporary husband clearly only too urgently required such discipline at the hands of the ladies of creation.

But it was all “too late, *a week*,” now she was afraid: and with a little air of regret she shook her curls over it.

Dismissing these thoughts with a sudden qualm from her lately very much underworked conscience, Matilda ran down the iron steps into the garden at the back of the stately old mansion which was now her home.

Away in the shade at the bottom of the lawn near the gently plashing fountain, over which a very green Neptune presided, her grandfather already sat reading; close at hand Frédéric in his striped waiscoat and long linen house-apron hovered over the gleaming silver and china of the breakfast table.

“*Bon jour, cher grandpère*,” called Matilda as she ran over the grass. “Am I abominably late? And are you and Frédéric very impatient with me? *Je vous demande pardon, tous deux*.”

At the sound of her voice the Duc looked up, laid aside his magazine, and rose to greet her.

“There is no need of pardon, *ma bien aimée*,” he smiled, taking her by the hand and leading her gaily to the chair which Frédéric, all welcoming smiles, too, held out for her. “And how goes the world today? But need not ask—for I can see very well that it is all *couleur de rose*.”

Matilda settled herself with characteristic pattings and smoothings of her laces and flounces.

“But how could everything be anything else but adorable this lovely morning, grandpapa?” she cried. “And I have

had the funniest letter from George: all in pencil and he has drawn horses' heads all over the page."

And with that she gave her whole mind to the very serious business of juggling, under the watchful eyes of Frédéric with cups and saucers, and silver coffee pot, sugar and boiling milk, until she had perfectly fashioned the Duc's morning cup of steaming and fragrantly aromatic coffee. This done they each congratulated the other on the result, and then Frédéric with a final glance over the table to see that nothing was lacking upon it, retreated softly over the grass housewards; after wishing them ceremoniously, "*Bon appétit!*" Whilst Matilda carefully holding the precious coffee cup came round to her grandfather and, perching herself on the arm of his chair,—a favourite trick of hers—handed him the delicious drink at the same time as she dropped a kiss as light as a rose leaf on the top of his white head: just where that immaculate parting of his was situated.

This being a daily ceremonial of great importance: and one which he would not have foregone for the whole world.

"And so thou art content, my little one," he smiled up at her.

"Absolutely, grandpapa," she returned in a voice that expressed no other emotion: and she went back to her own seat.

Then breakfast proceeded in its usual pleasant and leisurely fashion.

"This town," began the Duc suddenly, as he buttered himself a roll, "is I think full at the moment of every Englishman I ever knew. Theatres, restaurants, cafés, boulevards, all swarm with our English cousins. As for me I wish we were at Etrétat, or at Vichy; for Paris in August I do not greatly love. And there the *saison des eaux* might amuse you, *chérie*."

Matilda across the table smiled at him genially.

"We shall soon be able to go away," she said comfortingly. "For Her Majesty arrives today: and after all she's not

ing to make such a long visit. And I am so glad she is bringing with her the Royal children. Besides those delightful places you mentioned would be crowded with Parisians—so we should merely exchange one crowd for another.”

The old Duc chuckled.

“See what it is to be a natural philosopher,” he said. “But wish you had to drive out to St. Cloud in all this dust, instead of me, *ma chère*. If only Roville had not made such point of my giving him the lift, I think for once I should have allowed my white hairs to be my excuse.”

“Oh, fie,” frowned Matilda, “that would be very lazy.”

“I have the honour to be acquainted with someone else who is also very indolent in these warm days: and without my excuse of reverend age.”

Matilda’s grimace was eloquent of mischievous disgust.

“I am only lazy when you with great heartlessness desire me to dance with Monsieur—*un tel*—who possesses the feet of an elephant together with the unflagging energy of one of those wild American buffalo one reads about nowadays.”

Whatever rejoinder her grandfather was about to make to this spirited attack was stopped by the appearance of Frédéric once more; who announced a visitor.

It appeared that Mr. Francis, passing through Paris bound on some business for a client which took him southwards, desired to wait on the Duc and pay his respects, if Monseigneur was at leisure to receive them—thus Frédéric.

“Mr. Francis,” cried Matilda, instantly all pleasurable anticipation and excitement, “oh, grandpapa, will you not be very amiable and ask him to lunch with us today? It would give me the greatest pleasure in the world to see him.”

Thus entreated there was nothing for it but for her grandfather to acquiesce—which he did with the best grace in the world; for the thought had been his also.

He therefore rose from his seat, and, preparing to follow Frédéric whom he had already dispatched to inform Mr. Francis that he would be with him immediately, answered Matilda.

"Certainly I will ask him, *chérie*. And do thou see that Marie Amelie is warned who our guest is to be. For he is something of a favourite with our autocrat of the kitchen. She has been heard to declare that for an Englishman he has a remarkable understanding of sauces; and discerns the enormous difference between clear and merely thick soup."

Humming the most insinuating of little airs he then took himself off and made his way into the cool library lined with its many books that was such a favourite spot of his and whose tall windows overlooked the front courtyard with its massive gates, and old Jacqueline's stone-faced lodge.

Here he found Mr. Francis awaiting him clad in the coolest of alpaca suits.

"*Tiens*," the Duc greeted him, "this is an unexpected pleasure. How goes it with you, my dear Francis?"

And he held out his hand which Mr. Francis shook warmly.

"Before we go any farther let me break the news to you that you are commanded to join us at lunch, *mon cher*—if you have no other, or more pressing, engagement. For Matilda has laid her orders upon me: and we all obey her least wish these days. Also, I too most cordially invite you," he ended laughingly.

Accordingly Mr. Francis accepted the invitation expressing in felicitous if diverted fashion his sense of pleasure that Matilda still was so much like herself, and in all her good fortune remembered affectionately her old friends.

"But now," suggested the Duc with a shrewd look, as he begged the lawyer to be seated and drew up his own great leathern arm-chair. "Surely you have come to give me news——"

Mr. Francis admitted the impeachment; and bent forward to say impressively:

"Lord Lassington has come to the end of his patience. He visited me in Bedford Row last week to tell me as much with great picturesqueness of language. And between you

id me, I should say that he might indulge in the rashest actions at any moment if Matilda still remains obdurate. must also tell you that he is at this moment in Paris staying at the Embassy.

"The rashest of actions—" echoed the Duc. "And what could you advise, Francis, seeing that our young friend has already taken the bit in his teeth, as it were. I begged him remain the other side of the Channel until I sent for m."

Mr. Francis shook his head; an action both Matilda and Lord Lassington imposed upon him extremely often.

"Something must be done," he said. "And this is what I think I should advise."

Retaining his composure the Duc gave his most serious attention to all that Mr. Francis went on to say both about the actual situation and the effect on it of any summary step.

"*Chi va piano va sano*," observed the Duc judicially at last, "I wish our young friend would recollect that."

But knowing very well how youth with its wilduberances and passionate impatience plays the very mischief with the more staid and sane ideas of its elders, at the end of an hour's careful survey of the crisis both men had come to a definite understanding and had laid down for themselves a plan of action.

And then Mr. Francis rose to take his leave for an hour so, on the plea that he had certain other appointments to keep before lunch.

"Well," said the Duc reflectively, "that is the best we can do, I fancy. The plan might be worse and it might be better. But at least Lord Lassington will get in racing for a run for his money.' And for the rest, why we must leave it to Heaven."

"I'm afraid so," assented Mr. Francis: and then catching the Duc's humorous uplift of an eyebrow, added, "Odd that one should invariably rely on the heavenly powers as a last resource."

"But how human," rejoined the Duc with a smile. "*Adieu* then—till lunch. At half past one, my dear Francis. And do not forget that you take the first step in our little plot by driving out with Matilda in the Bois this afternoon. For me I shall now walk slowly over to the Embassy."

"I shall not forget," returned Mr. Francis firmly with a twinkle in his eye as he bowed himself out.

The Duc left alone went to the window and looked out on to the peaceful and empty courtyard.

"But I do not envy any of us for the next few days," he reflected ruefully, "for depend upon it there are going to be more fireworks here in this vicinity than those at Versailles next week in honour of the Queen."

Sadly he left the room with one very disquieting thought uppermost.

Whatever the outcome of the next few days might be he stood a great chance of losing entirely his treasured and petted little companion.

Mr. Francis proceeding at a leisurely pace in the direction of the river was at the same time coming to this conclusion—that the outcome of the affair would be, in his poor opinion, a pure toss-up.

But no trace of this conviction was visible as he sat facing Matilda over the luncheon table some two hours later listening to her gay chatter quite as appreciatively as her grandfather: and watching her with surreptitious glances whenever the conversation turned either towards England or on her future plans, in any way. For at these moments Matilda always became most blandly and annoyingly non-committal.

Towards the close of lunch the Duc made his first move and turning carelessly to the unconscious Matilda suggested that as he unfortunately had to go to the Strasbourg Station to meet the incoming Royalties she should ask Mr. Francis to accompany her for her afternoon drive in the Bois.

"And possibly, *chérie*, you can see the procession from the Champs Élysées afterwards," he added.

Matilda with a sudden spasm of recollection attacking her as to what one earlier and eagerly anticipated procession had done for her, not so very long ago, hesitated before he replied.

But not for so long that the pause, pregnant with fate as it was, although she was not aware of it, was noticeable to either her grandfather or Mr. Francis.

With the sweetest of smiles she made answer:

"I should be delighted," and so the arrangement was made.

Behold, then, Mr. Francis taking the air with her in the latest of small barouches a little later.

Matilda in a periwinkle-blue muslin covered with white polka dots, and a wide straw hat trimmed with periwinkle-blue flowers and long streamers of the same vivid colour.

Aloft she held at the correct and fashionable angle that most adorable of silk and fringed sunshades—once the desire of her heart: but now like all attained desires become so much of an everyday matter for her to waste any thought upon it.

Past the Palais of the Beaux Arts they drove chatting amiably, enjoying the fine afternoon and Paris at its most attractive and gayest, as enormously as their own company.

The whole town, as Matilda remarked, seemed to be out that day.

The pavements before the cafés were crowded with people: every little round green table was full under the striped awnings. And the dapper waiters darted to and fro mendingly with *apéritifs*, foaming jugs of chocolate, and called in stentorian tones for half a dozen different kinds of wines in the same breath. Slowly Mr. Francis let his interested glance rove over gentle and simple as they rubbed shoulders, passing slowly along the pavements, in the bright sunlight; where the only apparently busy people were the demure grisettes; who with their dark green bonnet boxes in their arms darted in and out of the crowds on their way home with late orders. Here and there an upright old man

dreamed over his *Journal* oblivious of the shifting, gay panorama about him, the red ribbon of the Legion in the buttonhole of his well-brushed coat, his wine for the moment neglected on the iron table at his side. Whilst volubly chattering and stout Parisiennes sailed by: and the *bonnes* in their round caps made sudden darts at their too active charges, or wheeled them in bright-coloured wicker bassinettes.

And somewhere in the distance a band wrestled with "Rule Britannia," in compliment to the expected guests; becoming particularly strong as to the cornet's part when least expected.

And overhead the flags of every nation, except the enemy, waved gaily in the breeze.

"Paris is an amazing city," commented Mr. Francis.

Matilda sighed happily.

"Yes," she replied softly.

"But unreliable," continued the lawyer reflectively. "Only eight years ago King Louis Philippe sat on this throne—however, there is no doubt that these foreigners take as naturally to revolutions as ducks do to the water."

"Isn't it odd," said Matilda tranquilly pursuing a train of reflection of her own, "to think I am French and not English, after all? No wonder I was too quick for the Misses Nixon."

Mr. Francis smiled.

"It wasn't so odd to me," he said.

"And to think that this time last year I was still at the Swallow's Nest—all by myself, too; for the Misses Nixon had gone to visit relatives in Yorkshire, it being holiday time. And so only Eliza and I were left to keep house together."

By this time the carriage having bowled swiftly along the Champs Élysées they were about to enter the Bois.

"Grandpapa suggested that we should have our chocolate near the lake—there is a delightful little restaurant there," said Matilda, a few minutes later.

"By all means," assented Mr. Francis, with the utmost

amiability: and at Matilda's request he transmitted the order to the footman.

"Her Grace of Westmainham is over here," began Mr. Francis. "She is on her way to Etrétat with Lady Victoria."

Matilda gave him a quick look.

"So Grandpapa said," she replied. "He has asked her to take luncheon with us one day next week. I am so glad she forgave Lady Victoria before Sir John went off to the Crimea. It would have been dreadful for her if she had been all alone now. But anyway I had got Grandpapa to promise that she should stay with us for a little while."

"That was very kind," answered Mr. Francis absently; and then added, "but I suppose you have not seen anyone from England in the last two months. I mean anyone that you met while you were at Tilney House."

"Not a soul," returned Matilda, "except of course Hortense. You know she is my maid now."

At this moment the carriage drew up before a wooded chalet built near the shining waters of the lake. Its terrace, which extended almost to the water itself, was absolutely filled with a well-dressed, chattering crowd that was taking its ease and its chocolate at numerous little tables congregated closely inside the enclosed and gravelled space.

With a swift look about him that went unremarked by Matilda, Mr. Francis got out of the carriage and helped her to alight. After which he followed her slowly up the narrow path which led to the restaurant.

A hurrying waiter who knew Matilda well, for often had she been there with her grandfather, came forward and piloted them dexterously to an unoccupied table very well placed under the shade of a very large tree.

"There," said Matilda as she sat down and smiled at Mr. Francis, "isn't this a piece of luck? One might almost imagine someone had been keeping this table for us."

But not waiting for his reply, which was perhaps just as well, as Mr. Francis had a very shrewd suspicion that

Matilda's statement had hit the mark, she gave Jules his usual order as to cakes and chocolate and ices.

Hardly had she finished describing the exact kind of cake she preferred, and the attentive Jules had darted away bent on finding her the most attractive cake in the kitchen, for he was one of Matilda's victims, when a clear voice at her elbow addressed her.

"And how do you do?" it asked. "And so we meet again."

Matilda started and grew pale and red almost in the same second. For this was the moment that Lord Lassington had selected to intrude himself upon her, it appeared.

Matilda turned: he was looking far too well she thought.

"How do you do, Francis?" he added with a grin.

Mr. Francis admitted a little stiffly that he was in the best of health.

"In short you have nothing to complain of," returned Lord Lassington breezily, "and you look well too, my lady."

And his audacious and significant eye wandered from the crown of Matilda's hat to the absurd little parasol lying on the table before her.

But he was not to have it all his own way.

"I trust," remarked Matilda vindictively, "that you do not see any resemblance today in my appearance to Mrs. Shem or Mrs. Ham——"

"Nor to the excellent Mrs. Japheth," he finished for her with a low bow.

"So glad," said Matilda, and fairly turned her back on him.

But she was not to get rid of him so easily: for it seemed that he had reinforcements with him. For now from the same table another suave voice addressed her.

"Little Horsey," this voice said softly, "is it really you? I wouldn't have known you."

And turning again Matilda found herself to her amazement looking into the bright eyes of Lady Victoria.

"Oh," said Matilda, "how are you? Mr. Francis was speaking of you, Lady Victoria."

The wife of Sir John Marlow shot an enquiring look at Mr. Francis.

"I am very much obliged to him," she said.

And then Lord Lassington opened fire once more.

"I hear you have been having a particularly good time, Matilda Hope," he remarked.

Matilda endowed him with an enigmatic look.

"I find the French an altogether delightful nation," she replied sweetly.

"Especially the young men, if rumour does not lie."

"They dance so well," admitted Matilda sedately.

An appreciative giggle from Lady Victoria marked the apier thrust.

"You've changed, dear little Horsey," she said. "But you're rather sweet, for all that."

It was at this moment that the hurrying Jules returned with his loaded tray: and almost simultaneously Her Grace of Westmainham appeared on the scene accompanied by several other young people, mutual acquaintances of Matilda's.

So that, in the general stir of greetings and rearrangement which immediately took place, Matilda found herself, in spite of an earnest desire to retire incontinently from the now to her embarrassing scene, an integral part of a large and merry party for the next hour which was bent on enjoying itself and which the more formal and better manners of those days forbade her to spoil by running away from. For was not her guest, Mr. Francis, so obviously enjoying both the charming society and the fine afternoon? Sighing a sigh at the destruction of her own peace of mind Matilda pulled herself sternly together and became, to outward appearance at least, not the least animated of the young people there.

But Lord Lassington, pipe he never so wisely or musically, he managed to avoid; with, as far as Mr. Francis could serve, sinister skill.

CHAPTER XXI

IN WHICH MATILDA DRIVES ALONG THE ROAD OF DESTINY

HISTORY chronicles for us the interesting fact that no less than fifteen thousand invitations were issued for the great fête at Versailles on Saturday evening, the twenty-fifth of August, eighteen hundred and fifty-five.

For a whole week Paris had given itself up to the entertaining of Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, and the Royal children.

From the first moment that a salvo of one hundred guns had announced their approach to the palace of Saint Cloud along the new Avenue de l'Impératrice, one entertainment had succeeded another.

Possibly a little to the surprise of everybody the hard-working and duty-loving Prince Consort had taken off the popular honours, as it were; for thousands of female hearts had found him *doux, charmant, noble, et plein de bonté!*

With the saturnine Emperor the Prince of Wales had made his own special conquest.

But for once the Queen and the Princess Royal had to be content with second place as far as the popular fancy was concerned.

However in every way the week had turned out a great success; and as Matilda drove with her grandfather in the sunset, along those country lanes down which years before a very different mob of people had hurried to the old palace their carriage with its outriders and postillions made merely one of an apparently never-ending line.

All along the beflagged roads crowds were out to see the

company pass by. And at Versailles the whole neighbourhood seemed black with people. Even while the western sky was still flaring red streamers across its breadth the general public was passing slowly along the side of the palace, and making its way towards the borders of the *Lacs Suisses* in order to get as good a view of the illuminations as possible.

A general and hearty cheer went up when, at a given signal, lights flew all along the lines of architecture of that magnificent pile of buildings. And dragoons took up their position in a strong body before the entrance of the *Cour d'Honneur* ready for the arrival of the distinguished guests. At the same moment lights began to shine from all the windows and the excitement of the crowd increased minute by minute as endless lines of carriages approached the palace to set down ladies glittering with jewels and men blazing with orders.

Indeed once again Versailles woke up to a fleeting vision of a brilliancy faintly approaching those far-off days of that *Roi Soleil*, who from a mere hunting seat built by the thirteenth Louis had enlarged his simpler residence into that magnificent architectural pile which is still today a wonder and a glory of France, although it has fallen far from its ancient splendour; and today the scuttling feet of tourists doing the sights," alone echo down its spacious halls and galleries.

Up the great state staircase Matilda moved on her grandfather's arm; and made a slow progress through the crowded galleries, here and there recognizing a friend or acquaintance.

And at last coming to the *Galérie des Glaces* made her hurtyseys to the royal and exalted circle gathered on the dais there; receiving a special smile from the Empress Eugénie with whom she was already something of a favourite.

Her duty done she immediately found herself pounced on by a group of young people of her own age who were becom-

ing very special friends of hers. And was soon engaged in a rapid give and take of witty sallies, the centre of them all, and as was her custom enjoying herself vastly when Lord Lassington—a discreetly late arrival—caught sight of her.

And so little for the moment did he recognize his erstwhile country mouse in the sparkling débutante in white satin, a diamond circlet holding up her curls, that he was guilty of staring at her with a rude intentness which drew down on him a sharp comment from Harriet, Duchess of Llandudno, beside whom he now found himself, before he really recognized Matilda.

“It’s a wise husband that knows his own wife nowadays, it would seem,” she observed.

Lord Lassington turned, and bent over the hand she extended.

“Oh, marriage is on the downgrade, I admit,” he observed.

Lady Sarah at her aunt’s right hand smiled one of her faint, enigmatic smiles.

“A week’s hard work, Doodles, does not seem to have much result?”

Lord Lassington met the fling with calm imperturbability.

“No battle is lost till it is won, Sally,” he reminded her with a significant look; and drifted away amongst the shifting crowd.

But although he had beaten a prompt retreat, not desiring any wordy altercation with Lady Sarah then, the smart rap over the knuckles she had administered had done its fell work. And, as on another occasion, she had precipitated a crisis. For now, in sober earnest, Lord Lassington then and there made up his mind that this indecisive skirmishing must cease and that they must arrive at some definite understanding before either he or Matilda were very much older.

However farther than this general conclusion he could not then adventure for he was hailed by the Duchess of Westminster at this instant with great feeling; who, greeting him as a friend in need, demanded of him that he should

instantly pilot her to some nearby buffet where she might refresh herself forthwith.

"For," she observed, looking scathingly round about her, "this mob has nearly torn me to pieces; and as usual Victoria has given me the slip and the Lord knows where she has gone. But now that she has been married for five minutes she gives herself as many airs as if she was the first original wife that ever entered the holy state. And altogether life is not what it is cracked up to be, nor royal parties neither."

This being the case Lord Lassington tendered his warmest sympathy to the disturbed matron and complying with Her Grace's request led her into the comparative quietude of one of the smaller galleries, where he found her a seat and the physical sustenance she craved with the skill of a practiced hand.

"Victoria always hails her discoveries of time-worn knowledge as if they were entirely novel," he said as he handed the Duchess a brimming glass of champagne and presented her also with a plate of *pâte-de-foie-gras* sandwiches.

"All young women grow more wild and trying every day," said the Duchess; and then with a swift change of subject added, "Your Marchioness is growing into a beauty, Doodles."

"So I perceive," he returned.

Full of her new discovery the Duchess absently sipped her sparkling wine and took alternate bites at her sandwiches, while surveying the shifting scene before her; and yet her next words seemed to have very little bearing on what had gone before.

"My present governess is a complete contrast in every way," she said blandly. "I am giving no hostages to fortune as far as my next two daughters are concerned—that is to say in the schoolroom department, at all events."

Lord Lassington regarded her amusedly.

"I don't doubt that there is much to be advanced in favour of the *status quo ante bellum*," he replied pleasantly; at which the Duchess nodded with vigour and laughed.

"George does not think so," she said. "In fact he is in the most violent opposition to the new ruler half the time. But I must confess we all miss the chit abominably. She has a way with her; that's not to be denied."

"Too true," assented Matilda's lord in accents of deep despondency and, mentally retiring forthwith to a very cave of Trophonious, added, "she too has made discoveries—and will make more."

The Duchess finished her champagne and her last sandwich.

"Very cryptic," said she briskly. "But what I want to know is when all this present nonsense is going to stop. It's quite time you both made up your minds—one way or the other."

She handed Lord Lassington her empty glass which he set down carefully on a corner of the buffet.

"I begin to believe that I have embarked on a fool's errand," returned Matilda's aggrieved swain with exceeding bitterness of manner as he sat down once more on the long rout seat on which the Duchess sat.

"According to my godfather's advice I have done my best all this week to soften her stony heart—without the least effect as far as the naked eye is concerned. Possibly with a telescope——"

"Yes, I have been watching you with much interest." The Duchess now assumed the air of a person endeavouring to remember historical details of the highest importance with absolute accuracy.

"On Monday last you were walking with her and her grandfather in the gardens of the Tuileries——"

"Not a word would she speak to me the whole afternoon."

"On Tuesday I caught sight of you having tea with her and several other young people at the Palais of the Beaux Arts."

"She didn't sit anywhere near me on that occasion, so I didn't gain much by that."

The Duchess laughed.

"Ah, well, they say that everything comes to the man who knows how to wait. But on Thursday, surely I espied you dancing in a quadrille she was in at the Hotel de Ville ball."

Lord Lassington suppressed a sigh and frowningly studied the large mediæval battle canvas which adorned the wall close at hand.

"I should like to point out," he made reply in his most judicial manner, "that I was not dancing actually with Matilda Hope—nor did I have that honour during the whole course of that evening. For it seemed to me she was engaged three deep for every blessed dance long before she arrived in the ballroom."

"And danced I suppose in that awful crush—and oh, what heat!" exclaimed Her Grace. "Really eight thousand cooped up there was too much of a good thing; in spite of Strauss's wonderful band."

"I don't think I ever detested any function quite as much as I did that ball," returned Lord Lassington thoughtfully.

The Duchess gave him a motherly pat on the arm.

"Come, cheer up, Doodles," she urged. "And let me present you with a bit of most excellent advice; for I've been watching the situation, too."

On hearing this Lord Lassington looked up not unhopelessly; for he respected the Duchess's judgment knowing her to be endowed with much good sense and shrewdness.

"Haunting the little lady's steps," she continued lightly, "in a perfectly ordinary and lovelorn manner will not give you any advantage with that little chit. More than ever now that she is enjoying her life so much and is being so spoiled by old Antoine. If you want to win her you must really think of something less hackneyed and more robust."

"More robust?" he repeated, and his look was both long and interrogative. "You're not suggesting I should do anything in the kidnapping line, are you?"

"Short of that—yes," returned the Duchess with decision. "Now will be the time to take her by surprise I am sure."

For it's ten chances to one she's in love with you now and doesn't know it, my dear boy."

Lord Lassington's face brightened perceptibly.

"Or she wouldn't plague you so and hide so elaborately behind this rampart of pretended indifference. If she had really done with you she'd have left Paris the minute you entered it. Now you try something more primitive and less polite," ended Her Grace.

And with this resolute counsel uppermost in his now actively working mind Lord Lassington found himself an hour afterwards seated at the end of one of the long tables in the supper room just far enough away from the royal circle, as also his own particular friends, as to be able to study his problem in peace and quiet; and decide what violent move he had best make. For a determined one it would have to be after the Duchess's hint, anyone could see that.

And, wonder of wonders, for once in his life chance, it would seem, had played most miraculously into his hand.

For there beside him, quite unconscious of his near presence, most tranquilly sat no less a person than Matilda herself; and again, his luck being dead in, he saw that her escort was no one more attractive, or fascinating, than an elderly, slightly deaf friend of her grandfather's. Who having piloted her to the nearest vacant seat was now devoting all his attention to his supper; and taking so little notice of Matilda that inevitably, sooner or later, Lord Lassington realized amusedly, she must turn her head and her attention in his direction.

Placidly therefore he sat there and waited; content for the moment to be unremarked. For this time he believed he held all the trumps.

At last several earnest attempts at conversation having proved all in vain Matilda did what the watcher expected; and, looking round quickly, scrutinized the being Heaven had bestowed on her on her other hand, and with whom she must politely converse during the next hour.

Very much dazed at the, to her utterly unexpected, *rencontre*, she recognized in her neighbour this husband of hers who seemed to be rapidly becoming ubiquitous; so often had she encountered him in the last few hectic days. And meeting his inflexible look she was conscious of a sudden moment of panic.

"Oh," she murmured faintly.

"Yes," he returned, "here we are again. And this time I'm stiff, stubborn, full of starch, and rigid in my views, let me tell you, madam; also stiff-necked, dogged, and per-
inacious."

Attentively Matilda gazed at the imperial arms on her plate as though she had never seen them before.

"Did you hear?" he continued, and he crossed his arms in the menacing manner of one who means to stick at nothing. "I am at last to be reckoned with: for I warn you I am obstinate, madam, positive and tenacious."

This harangue he felt should have had a most excellent effect; but to his disappointment Matilda merely turned an inattentive and cold beam upon him.

"Did you do this on purpose?" she demanded, quite obviously not at all impressed with his recital of his newly acquired characteristics.

Lord Lassington affected to ponder over this question.

"What would you say if I had?" he countered after a moment.

"I should say I detested you for playing such an abominable trick on me," returned Matilda promptly.

"The reply then is—certainly not," he rejoined. "But it must be well known by this time to your ladyship that Destiny possesses strange notions of the comic."

"Comic?" Matilda looked round the brilliant scene obviously puzzled. "What is comic about this?"

Lord Lassington waved a negligent hand over the assembly.

"I am not alluding to the company," he explained. "I was defining the situation."

"Was that all?"

And Matilda tossing her head, till the diamonds in her circlet winked again, turned a very slim shoulder to him.

"I am now going to converse with my own partner," she explained sharply. "You would do well to try and amuse your old lady, I am sure."

At this Parthian shot Lord Lassington grinned appreciatively for his partner had long left girlhood behind, and her interest in life was mainly centred in the pleasures of the table, too.

"But I am afraid it will be uphill work for you," he suggested commiseratingly. "And you'll find your partner a leetle dull."

And with that he turned away.

His prophecy proved so true that after several heroic but absolutely forlorn attempts to carry on a one-sided conversation with the old Comte de Vieuxville, Matilda abandoned the hopeless task in impatient despair, and decided to remain in a state of siege as far as her other desperately provoking and presumptuous boon companion was concerned.

But it did seem too distracting that at such an entertainment as this was Matilda should have all her pleasure spoilt by being forced into such a position as made it necessary for her to fraternize with so challenging a person.

One thing she could do, and would, however: she would give him a Roland for his Oliver.

But by the time she had come to this conclusion of defiance Lord Lassington, having evidently taken her caustic advice to heart, was plunged into an animated and airy duel of good-humoured persiflage with the female seated beyond him which took up all his time and attention.

Bursts of laughter punctuated the conversation at regular intervals, so it seemed to Matilda; and to her cautiously apprising eye the whole affair bore an air of intimacy which she had not anticipated. Moreover a stray sentence here

and there assured her that Lord Lassington's new acquaintance possessed an uncommonly pretty daughter not entirely unknown to that blythe peer and for whom he expressed considerable admiration: eulogizing in clear tones, which carried most distinctly to Matilda's ear, and in mellow and rounded periods this damsel's remarkable amiability of character.

"We have met too little recently; and that fault must be remedied," she heard him declare, with a brazenness for which she could not find too strong condemnation. "But until recently I had claims on my time, and my life, which I could not ignore. Today it is——"

Lowering his voice confidentially Matilda did not catch, unfortunately, what today meant to him. And with a disapproving shake of the head at the stupendous fickleness of the male heart she now bestowed a careful consideration on her own supper. Whilst beside her the light, if irritating, flow of badinage continued unendingly—or so it seemed to her.

At last after an unendurably dull interval, Lord Lassington ventured to turn again to the pensive and listless Matilda.

"You might just as well talk pleasantly to me as not," he declared. "It commits you to nothing, you know. And after all it is your duty—more or less."

"I have been doing my duty for a week past entirely to please grandpapa, because he is so fond of you, and I am so fond of him," retorted Matilda with immense feeling, "and I can only tell you that it gets more irksome each day."

Lord Lassington to this made a wry face.

"*Ne reveillez pas le chat qui dort,*" he murmured conveniently; which made Matilda feel more irritated than ever.

"Besides I simply don't know what to say to you. For if you recollect on Tuesday, or was it Monday, I drew your attention to the sweetest little bird with the brightest eyes hopping on a twig in the Tuileries Gardens and——"

"Damn the little bird!" said Lord Lassington most heartily.

"There, you see," returned Matilda, "yours is a harsh nature I am afraid, sir, and what harm had the poor little thing done to you, I should like to know."

"The introduction of that bird on the occasion you mention destroyed the best argument I had ever evolved to make you understand— But, there—there's none so deaf as the female who will not pay attention. Besides I am not interested in natural history."

"Then you ought to be: it would raise your tone, I am sure," said Matilda feeling that they were beginning to skate on very thin ice.

"And as for talk," continued Lord Lassington with increasing acerbity, "monosyllabic snubbings can hardly be dignified by that name, I should fancy. And they have been my chilly portion for the last week."

But his reproachful air merely drew from Matilda a scornful glance.

"Anybody with any sense would know when their company was not wanted."

"And can you look me in the face and repeat that monstrous fabrication?" was Lord Lassington's prompt retort.

Again Matilda felt herself to be on the horns of a dilemma.

"My goodness," she cried, "and can you sit there and pretend that I have been——"

"Anything else but an icicle," he finished neatly for her. "No: but beneath that deceptive calm of yours lurks a volcano in full blast——"

For a moment Matilda stared at him uncertainly.

"Now, don't deny it," he went on. "You know very well what a fiery nature yours is."

"I do not—and you are all wrong—and well you know it—so there," cried Matilda incoherently.

And for the first time that evening she looked uncertain and distressed.

Lord Lassington was swift to take advantage of this momentary display of irresolute response to his accusations of coldness and want of heart—volcano or no volcano. If only he could instill the smallest bit of fear as to the ultimate outcome—as to what drastic action she might force him to take—if only he dared to imagine that underneath her present cool superciliousness she really cared—if only he could prevail on her to admit that she was not entirely indifferent to him—why then— But these were only assumptions after all.

And Matilda yet remained to be won, he felt with many misgivings.

Still—never admit a possibility of defeat.

Therefore he continued with a firmness he was far from feeling.

“But you’ll try me too far, Matilda Hope, one of these days. There is a limit to human endurance. And when you have lost me forever, yes, forever—you’ll be very sorry.”

And he assumed an extremely high and mighty expression, to lend point to his dramatic remarks.

To his chagrin however the dire threat had an entirely opposite effect on her to the one he had intended and looked for. For with one of those rapid changes of mood which were so characteristic of her Matilda no longer appeared put out of countenance but laughed at the sad picture he had drawn most heartily and all her dimples came most bewitchingly into full play.

“That would be a most distressing state of affairs,” she admitted demurely. “But I’m afraid we have not time to discuss it at present; for, look, everyone is leaving the gallery and going out of doors to see the illuminations. And we must not miss them.”

She rose from her chair as she spoke; and amidst the general movement towards the doors was about to claim the attention once more of her long neglected escort; when Lord Lassington, catching at her hand, detained her.

"Matilda," he whispered audaciously (and never had he looked to her more handsome or certain of himself), "forget for once you hate me, and come and see these illuminations with me. I promise I'll behave like a saint. Can you not be kind for half an hour?"

For an eternity it seemed to him standing there with his eyes fixed on her Matilda remained motionless considering his appeal.

Then she said in a low tone, with a sudden vivid blush: "Very well."

And hardly believing his good fortune—or daring to imagine what that rosy flag she had flown so unexpectedly might augur for him—he led her in silence into the summer night.

CHAPTER XXII

IN WHICH THE TOSSING UP OF A COIN IS PRODUCTIVE OF
THE HAPPIEST OF RESULTS

MATILDA'S unexpected and girlish softening was not lasting, so Lord Lassington found to his intense surprise. And that which her behaviour augured on the night of the illuminations at Versailles was not borne out by her subsequent conduct. For on the following Wednesday a great gulf of icy resolve on her part opened up to the anxious mistress of her grandfather who had been allowing his hopes to rise high after an interview with his godson. But Matilda issuing a stern ultimatum forced her grandfather to seek another less pleasant meeting in order to inform Lord Lassington that she would not meet her peccant husband again. On this point she was obdurate.

Dejectedly the Duc de Lorgny had to admit that as to the why and wherefore of her resolve she had remained markedly silent but her determination was immense. Added to which she had begged her grandfather to leave Paris as soon as might be, and this move must inevitably put a stop to any further efforts on the part of his godson to make peace with Matilda. At any rate for the time being.

This embassy Matilda learned, on her grandfather's return, Lord Lassington had received with a curious absence of interest; intimating that if she saw fit now to banish him forever he would leave her unfettered and of his own accord betake himself forthwith to other and far distant spots on the round globe.

"After all the world is wide enough for both of us. And there are other—damsels," he had said reflectively.

On hearing this Matilda tossed her curls; but made no comment audibly.

The Duc de Lorgny therefore proceeded to add that in his opinion matters had gone too far on this occasion and that very possibly Matilda must make up her mind that her husband was about to slip beyond her horizon completely.

"So much the better," said she, and went upstairs to dress for her usual afternoon drive in the Bois with him.

Intently as he watched her all that afternoon he could not perceive any change in her usual cheerful demeanour. Nor was she a less talkative companion to him throughout the rest of the day. It was therefore with some dismay that the Duc learned from Hortense just before the dinner hour that Matilda was suffering from a severe headache, which had entirely prostrated her, and that therefore she must remain in a darkened room for some hours at least; and would not in consequence be well enough to attend the reception at Monsieur le Comte de Vieuxville's to which she had been invited with her grandfather that evening. A thousand pities—Hortense admitted. But what would you? These migraines were as the wind, coming and going as they pleased.

In spite of his settled judgment that things must now be allowed to take their course—across the Duc's mind flashed a last venturesome notion.

He dismissed Hortense, therefore, with suitable expressions of regret; and ringing for Frédéric sent him off shortly after with a brief note to Lord Lassington.

Meanwhile Matilda lay, as once before, on her bed with her face turned to the wall.

In the dimness and silence of her room the sound of the carriage wheels which announced her grandfather's departure later for the party she had so looked forward to and which now she had not spirits enough to attend caused her to shed a few tears. After which she abandoned her uneasy couch for a silent pacing up and down; during

which she pondered over the queer force which drives the human mind to say one thing in the most uncompromising terms when all the time it is not at all certain that it does mean another.

Like many another agitated creature before her Matilda wished she had never said anything at all.

"For," said she, coming to a stop in front of the open window. "I feel very much as a robber must after he has taken all the money out of the till; and sees no way of getting it back in safety. Now I'm left in the lurch."

This phrase had been a favourite expression of the Misses Dixon and although at the time of its too frequent use by these eminent preceptresses of hers a much hated one on the part of Matilda, it now bobbed up as extremely apposite.

At this moment the clock on the stairs struck ten and Hortense came into the room with a lamp in her hand. She expressed great concern at seeing Matilda up: and so restlessly moving about the room.

"Why, *chérie*," she cried, "you will not lose your headache. And they are making you a tisane downstairs at this moment——"

Matilda made a face.

"I hope it is not camomile tea," she said.

But to this Hortense made no reply: partly because she was busily moving about lighting candles, pulling curtains and generally setting the room to rights, and partly because Matilda's guess was right and she knew there was a struggle before them—but she also knew that Matilda would end by drinking the tea.

Lackadaisically from the window Matilda watched Hortense's brisk movements; then taking a most unexpected resolution she spoke again.

"I believe," she said quickly, "I'll go to that party after all; my headache is much better."

Hortense sat down with great suddenness on the nearest chair.

"*Mon Dieu*," she cried, "But that will be madness. Only

an hour ago you were so *souffrante* that I had a great notion to send for the doctor."

But to this Matilda merely laughed reiterating her decision; causing thereby a tremendous flow of eloquent language from the aggrieved Hortense. Which was only cut short by the sound of the bell down at the concierge's lodge breaking in on her arguments.

"Whatever can that be, at this time of night?" she cried.

Matilda did not reply to her question at once but catching up a light shawl threw it over her shoulders and stepped out on to the balcony outside her room.

Peering down into the courtyard she made out old Jacqueline parleying animatedly with a visitor who, completely enveloped in a cloak, stood well beyond the light shining out of the lodge door so that she could not see him at all distinctly.

"Some friend of grandpapa's, I expect," she told Hortense as she re-entered the room. "Come, dress me quickly; for I really mean to go out. I am quite recovered, and I wish to give grandpapa a surprise."

Grumbling Hortense gave in and proceeded to array Matilda in her evening regalia.

Meanwhile old Jacqueline had shut out the stranger into the starry night it seemed; for Matilda distinctly heard, after quite a long interval, the door bang below and the bolts go back into their rusty sockets.

"I wonder who that was," she said in a low tone as she took her wrap from Hortense and left the room.

On the staircase she met Frédéric ascending from the hall with a letter in his hand.

"Who rang that bell just now?" she demanded as he stood back to let her pass.

"Mademoiselle is going out?" he asked with a dramatic uplifting of his hands. "All *souffrante* as she was."

Matilda smiled upon him with the utmost geniality.

"I am quite recovered now," she returned. "So I have decided to give grandpapa a surprise. Please call me a

fiacre—Hortense is putting on her bonnet and will come with me."

With a low bow the old servant let her run past him.

"It shall be as Mademoiselle wishes," he replied, "naturally."

But he too looked discomforted and disapproving.

"Tell Hortense I will wait in the drawing-room," called back Matilda over her shoulder and vanished into its softly lighted depths.

It was not until she had gone out on the little stone terrace and leant over the iron balustrade sniffing the fragrant night air on which a thousand elusive and flowery scents lingered that she recollected Frédéric had not answered her question.

With a sudden impulse she turned and went back into the room.

At first in the dim light she saw no one; then some slight movement behind her as she shut the long French windows made her swing round in alarm.

The next moment her heart was racing madly.

For there with his back against the door stood the Marquis of Lassington.

"So it was you," said Matilda.

"I saw you on the balcony," he returned. "So good of you to change your dress for me; that is one of the prettiest you have."

After this there was a moment of tense hush.

"Perhaps you will now be kind enough to let me pass," was Matilda's next arctic rejoinder; and forbiddingly she faced him.

"Perhaps I won't," he retorted.

"That would not surprise me after your behaviour of Saturday night."

Lord Lassington permitted an expression of pained deprecation to cross his composed features.

"How could I know a rocket was going up just as I kissed you?" he asked.

Matilda shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't wish to be reminded of it," she returned. "You took advantage of a moment of weakness."

"I did not," said Lord Lassington destroying at one blow her regal poise, "you wanted me to kiss you—you know you did."

Matilda gazed upon him with wrathful and sparkling eyes.

"Liar!" she cried; and then completely spoilt her dramatic utterance by adding, "At least you shouldn't have exposed me to the public gaze like that. And you worried me so with your absurd protestations; and everything whizzing and banging about me—that I really did not know whether I was on my head or on my heels."

And with that she turned her back on him and seated herself on a distant sofa.

To this accusation however, Lord Lassington merely remarked "Pooh," and fell into an attitude of watchful waiting.

"Besides," continued Matilda after an inflexible pause, "the illuminations were most dazzling, and I was not myself at all."

"Excuses," returned her husband scornfully and said no more.

Matilda tried another tack.

"Anyway Saturday is finished and done with, and I sent you a message by grandpapa——"

"I know all about that," said he.

"Then why are you here? And how did you get in?"

Lord Lassington shifted his weight from one foot to the other and crossed his arms.

"Strategy, my dear child, strategy," he returned. "I informed Frédéric you had sent for me. And he seemed quite pleased."

Matilda gazed blankly before her.

"The colossal impudence of it," she murmured.

To which Lord Lassington quoted the old adage that all was fair in the affairs of love and the affairs of battle.

"Which is this?" demanded Matilda irately.

"Whichever you prefer—or both," was his obliging reply.

The expression of Matilda's face informed him as to her feelings on this point quite sufficiently before she cried:

"Then I prefer—war."

But this uncompromising bellicosity however merely elicited from the lounging Lord Lassington a short laugh.

"*Vive la Gloire!*" said he: and with an expressive shrug of his shoulders continued, "so be it. And this time it will be a fight to a finish, Matilda Hope."

Leaving this announcement to sink in he seized this opportunity to abandon his post by the door and striding across the room seated himself on the edge of the writing table which stood between the window and the fireplace.

"Also," he added in firm tones as he contemplated Matilda's wilful little figure, "I am not going to lose you unless I must."

This was explicit enough but Matilda's reception of it was as blank as though the information held no kind of significance for her—was indeed a mere empty sounding phrase.

And with a quick movement she turned on him.

"What about that delightful young lady I heard you speaking of on Saturday night?" she demanded with an air of dispassionate interest that set her husband laughing heartily.

"Oh, you needn't laugh in that guilty way," she cried. "You said she possessed a simply perfect nature; and that you had met her too little recently. And I quite agree with you that it should be remedied. You see I remember quite well; also you remarked that today——"

She hesitated for a moment before she finished.

"That today—there were no claims on you; no claims on you," she repeated.

"Well, have I?" he retorted swiftly and looked Matilda sternly in the eye while she considered the question.

"Perhaps not," she admitted at last with a sigh.

"Then you cannot criticize me," he returned.

"I don't want to: I only want you to go away."

And at this point she spread her tulle skirts over her crinoline with the air of one who does not wish any further conversation on a disagreeable subject.

Lord Lassington made no effort to conceal his lazy admiration of the charming picture she made as she sat there looking up at him from under her long eyelashes.

"You're prettier than ever," he said.

"I'm so glad."

"But you're quite spoilt."

"Grandpapa doesn't think so."

Lord Lassington regarded this insufferable complacency of hers with much disapproval.

"You may be fashionable now—but you've no heart. And you are a sad little coquette, Matilda Hope. I preferred you as you were—when I pulled you out of that cab."

He sighed and added that, in his opinion, then she was the dearest little thing. But if he hoped at that moment for any kind of surrender from the warlike Matilda it was a forlorn one indeed. For extremely upright she sat and quite unyielding, as far as he could see.

"I've learnt a lot since that day," she said.

"But not when to stop."

"What do you mean?" she was frankly puzzled at this utterance.

Lord Lassington shifted his position to the fireplace before he answered and leaning his elbow on the marble mantelpiece stood looking absently down into the empty grate.

"For the last time," he said after a weighty pause, "I am going to make an effort."

"Yes," said Matilda sitting with folded hands and her eyes cast down. But he did not seem in any hurry to

develop his case so Matilda waited patiently for him to speak again; a tiny misgiving now springing to life in her mind.

At last he raised his look from the ground and spoke.

"I am off to Vienna—tomorrow morning. And I shall not come back," he said.

In spite of the shock this announcement caused her, Matilda found herself saying.

"I hope you will find Vienna interesting."

"And unless you alter your mind in the next hour," continued Lord Lassington brushing aside the sarcasm as not worthy of notice, "both your grandfather and I have decided that this absurd marriage of ours had better be annulled."

"Oh," said Matilda in a faint voice; far more nonplussed than she liked to admit.

"So what I really have come to do is to say—good-bye."

"That doesn't take long to say."

With ostentatious and devil-may-care indifference Lord Lassington now met Matilda's defiant glance.

"And soon you'll be free to break the heart of some other luckless fool," he cried accusingly, "with your whims and your fancies."

But this was too much for Matilda who, stung to the quick by such cruel injustice, leaped to her feet and advanced on her husband like a small whirlwind.

"How dare you say such a thing?" she exclaimed, not attempting to conceal her rancour. "When you know I loved you dearly—yes, I did. And I thought you the most wonderful being in the world—but you have always treated me with insupportable carelessness. And a little kiss with rockets going up everywhere cannot make up for everything—no, it can't."

Scarlet and furious she faced him valiantly.

"I don't want to be your wife—no, I don't," she stormed. "You can go to Vienna—anywhere, for all I care now. I shall stay with grandpapa."

And having hurled this defiance at him with the utmost fierceness she sank on to the nearest chair and with a complete collapse of spirit began to sob with exceeding bitterness; watched by the imperturbable Lord Lassington who made no effort to comfort her at all. For, at last, he fancied discretion to be the best suit he could play; and that now if ever wisdom in action was vitally important.

At last Matilda's sobs grew less violent: and a choked voice spoke.

"Have you a handkerchief?" it asked: and a hand gropingly felt for the desired article. Matilda's face being turned away and buried in the chair back.

With a faint smile lingering about the lines of his composed features Lord Lassington produced the required object and handed it to his Niobe.

"That's flat," he said. "So after this all I have to do is to go. I will not force myself on you any longer."

From behind the borrowed handkerchief proceeded merely an incoherent murmur; and Lord Lassington resumed the delivery of his valedictory speech.

"You can keep my handkerchief as a parting souvenir," he said. "And now I am going—but remember this, Matilda Hope—I am never coming back again. This cuts all ties between us."

Patiently he waited for some recognition from Matilda of this impressive statement, but beyond a very faint farewell from the depths of the chair into which she had cast herself, let him strain his hearing as much as he would, he could catch nothing.

Steadily he contemplated the huddled figure in the brocade *bergère*.

"Such a pretty thing—and so heartless," he said. "But now you may whistle for me, Matilda Hope."

And opening not any too gently the door he marched forth into the empty hall, whence even Frédéric had disappeared in his Gallic desire to be tactful. Crushing his hat well down over his forehead, and catching up his cloak

anyhow—not even pausing long enough to throw it round him so anxious was he now to leave forever this house that contained every frustrated hope he had ever entertained—he was about, very literally, to hurl himself out of the front door when, to his intense astonishment, a low but extremely clear whistle proceeded from the room he had just left. A whistle too that gained in volume and became with each passing second more insistent.

Hesitatingly Lord Lassington looked over his shoulder—took a step towards the half-opened drawing-room door.

Then he shook his head with much decision. And a second later the front door opened and shut with much needless clamour. After which the house became mute once more.

“Well,” said Matilda indignantly, appearing on the threshold of the scene of the late spirited encounter with amazing speed, “no one could possibly understand him. He tells me to whistle—a most unladylike task—and then leaves me in the lurch—yes, quite in the lurch.”

Sharp as a needle her glance penetrated through the gloom of the empty hall from end to end.

“You told me to whistle if I wanted you, sir, you know you did,” she apostrophized the grimly closed outer door; and then in a voice hardly above a whisper she added to nothing in particular. “And I—I—believe I do.”

After which admission with a heartfelt sigh at the injustice with which the male was capable of treating the young and lovely she retired into the mountain fastnesses of the drawing-room once more. But she omitted to shut the door.

Nevertheless no one was more astounded, to all outward appearance, than she was when, after another extremely short interval, a tall figure cloaked and hatted, appeared in the doorway coldly demanding to know what she meant by whistling for him—as though he were a mere cabby?

“Did you enjoy your stay in Vienna—though short?” was the irrepressible maiden’s query.

This ridiculous question met of course with the only fate it deserved; and brushing it aside contemptuously Lord Lassington demanded what Matilda wanted of him.

"I—I—" faltered Matilda nervously, on whom the sight of this saturnine figure was having a markedly intimidating effect.

"Say on," he commanded in the deep tones of a much tried man.

But this Matilda found extremely difficult.

"You look so like a pirate," she declared at last, "that I can't get it out."

Lord Lassington raised a weary eyebrow.

"My looks do not belie me then—for at this present moment, madam, I could see the whole of creation walk the plank with pleasure," he returned: but he cast away the offending articles of dress on a sofa and resumed his old position by the chimney-piece. Five minutes did the clock tick away sedately; and still Matilda's request remained unuttered.

"What did you wish to say to me?" asked her husband coolly.

For the shortest space of time possible a pair of troubled, shy eyes met his.

"Don't go to Vienna," said Matilda softly, and let her glance fall to the carpet once more.

"Why not?"

"Because—oh, because I've heard Lady Sarah say no young man ever came back the same."

Darkly he gazed into futurity.

"Little I care," he returned with a magnificent and stoical recklessness: and turned away to study his appearance in the mirror behind him with meticulous care.

An incoherent sentence which died away into a distressed silence was all he caught thereafter. However this did not appear to displease him for he exchanged something very like a confidential wink with his well-looking reflection in the glass.

"It makes not the slightest difference to you whether I am living or dead," he continued sternly. "And well you know it."

In the mirror, all unknown to her, he watched her make hurried gesture of denial to this accusation yet he went on more determinedly.

"For you don't love me—I see it all now—and I am sorry I ever wasted my kisses on you."

Again he paused to reconnoitre within the mirror as to the effect of this on the enemy. But Matilda remained still as a statue—with her head bent and her hands folded in her lap.

"However I give you my solemn word of honour," he went on, "that I'll never kiss you again——"

The slightest of movements reflected faithfully in that tell-tale glass interrupted him for a moment—but still Matilda remained as mum as a mouse.

"At any rate, not until you have kissed me of your own accord. And as you will never do that——"

He broke off to swing round on her with alarming abruptness.

"Would you mind repeating what you said just now?" he asked; for certainly Matilda had muttered something which sounded to him amazingly like, "Don't be too sure."

But it appeared that she was not in the habit of repeating her remarks to anyone—and having found her voice he now merely used it to deliver on lines learnt at the Misses Nixon's scholastic establishment a very moving homily on the duty of all young men of position to stick by their country and estates, which needed them, and not to a-roving to such dreadfully wicked cities as Vienna—and possibly Constantinople—(dreadful tales had she heard about the latter place). Very moving she was on this topic using many wise saws culled from various sources, as the Misses Nixon, old Silas, Lady Sarah Hemerton and Mr. Francis whom she reserved for a final *bonne bouche*, as it were. But to all this eloquence Lord Lassington turned a

singularly obdurate and deaf ear. He could see no reason to remain within a thousand miles of a young lady who had treated him for months past, he might say without any exaggeration, so ill. Wrung his heart, spoilt his appetite and robbed him of his sleep. In his turn he reached most lofty heights. So that when he had finished his recital of injury there seemed no way out of the impasse their joint behaviours had created.

Then to Matilda, in this moment of stress, came her wonderful idea; and one that was very characteristic.

"Could we not toss up?" she asked timidly, when Lord Lassington ended his peroration.

Not certain that he had heard aright he stared at her.

"Toss up—did you say?" he enquired.

Matilda nodded.

"It seems the only way out," she explained with a practical good sense that was wholly admirable.

Lord Lassington burst out laughing.

"Very ingenious, upon my word," he cried. "Well, have it your own way, Matilda Hope—Britannia—I go: the Queen—I stay."

And he took a florin out of his pocket.

Matilda came towards him with parted lips and eager eyes.

"Britannia—I go: Her Majesty—I stay," he repeated impressively; and he spun the coin in the air.

Up it went—and down it fell on the carpet.

Hurriedly both bent to look.

"Best of three——" cried Matilda breathlessly: and she snatched the coin from the floor.

But her husband casting himself on to the nearest chair gave vent to peals of laughter.

"No—no," he gasped. "I shall abide by my decision. Britannia herself is against it. You certainly have original ways of treating serious subjects. And I cannot imagine any man being dull with you about his house. But you know very well you don't care a brass button for me."

"Oh, yes I do," returned Matilda firmly, "lots of brass buttons."

"I can't believe you," said Lord Lassington becoming grave once more; and his attitude was so uncompromising that Matilda, who no longer deceived herself as to the state of her affections, cast wildly about for some magic formula by which she might convince him of her sincerity. But not one single argument could she think of.

"Oh, dear," she cried at last in desperation, "what can I say to make you understand—I do care for you? Indeed, Doodles, dear Doodles, if you were as poor as Job's turkey or as queer as Dick's hatband—I should always love you."

"Is that the truth?" asked Lord Lassington with an odd expression of suppressed mirth at the quaintness of her similes.

"Yes," replied Matilda.

"What a pity it's too late," said he.

"Too late?"

"Yes—now that I am under a vow."

"A vow?" Matilda was openly dismayed and puzzled. What kind of a vow?"

Lord Lassington looked up at her most solemnly.

"I give you my word of honour—I'll never kiss you again—not until you kiss me," he recited in dramatically hollow tones. "That's what I promised you just now."

Matilda restrained a quick movement towards him.

"But you needn't keep such a ridiculous promise," she returned; and there was a world of soft coaxing in her voice.

Lord Lassington gazed at her reproachfully, and then rose with tremendous dignity to his feet.

"Like Cœur de Lion I never break my word," he said proudly.

"Oh," said Matilda.

"So I must e'en shoulder my pack and travel," he continued, assuming the far-sighted look of one who had many miles to cover before dawn.

Matilda, dejected and taken aback as she was, still made another effort.

"Is there no way out?" she returned.

"Yes—one," he returned.

"What is it?"

"It's a very easy way, quite simple—and I flatter myself not unpleasant," he declared. "You kiss me, Matilda Hope—and all will be well. Besides you certainly owe me a kiss or two."

Matilda looked at him—Matilda shook her head.

"It's not easy—and it's not simple—and I don't owe you any kisses."

"All right," said Lord Lassington and made a determined plunge for the door.

"Stop!" cried Matilda.

With his fingers on the very door knob Lord Lassington halted.

"Come here, please," said Matilda.

And he came and stood before her looking down at her quizzically enough.

"Well?" said he.

"Please bend your head a little," directed Matilda in businesslike tones, "and shut your eyes."

She waited patiently for him to do so before she continued:

"And I will give you a butterfly kiss. That can do nobody any harm."

"The harm has been done already," he reminded her; but he bent towards her with closed eyes as she directed.

One more question she had to ask before completing the ceremony.

"Which eye would you prefer?" she enquired politely; standing on tip-toe ready to administer this accolade, as it were.

"Left," he returned decidedly.

So Matilda reached up and kissed him lightly on the eye he indicated; and then, and not till then, did he catch her to him.

"Won—won—" he cried exultantly. "You're mine, Matilda Hope. And now you are never going to give me the slip any more."

Sometime afterwards—Matilda spoke again.

"Why did you choose the left eye, Doodles?" she asked.

"Because it brought you nearest my heart," he said; and kissed her again.

FINIS.

809908

DISCARD

DISCARD

